

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **19 May 2022**
By **Chief Executive**
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**
Note

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 24 March NPA.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Defra consultation on next steps from the **Glover Review** closed on 9 April and I understand they received some 15,000 responses. It is heartening to see this level of interest in the future of our Protected Landscapes. I have circulated the SDNPA response which arose from the member workshop and the deliberations of the governance sub-group which was ratified at the last NPA meeting. The South Downs Partnership (see below) also submitted a response via its chair Clare Moriarty and so, of course, has National Parks England (NPE).
- 2.2 Alongside the online questionnaire, Defra officials have been running a series of workshops and “deep dive” sessions on the topics in the consultation, for example the proposals to strengthen s62 and management plans and of course the ideas around a National Landscapes Partnership. I have been attended many of these as have other staff across the SDNPA. They typically included 30-50 participants from a wide range of sectors and interests including the YHA, CPRE, Wildlife Trusts and the CLA.
- 2.3 The Department will have a huge job on its hands to analyse all this material and at the same time to make the business case inside government for the legislative time it will need to secure to implement the key proposals. I understand that they are employing a data processing agency to undertake the analysis but that the responses from individual NPAs and AONBs (and their representative bodies) will be separated out for special consideration within Defra.
- 2.4 We finally received confirmation from Defra of our **grant settlement** on 1 April. This confirmed that we have a flat cash grant settlement for 2022/23 and an “indicative” flat cash allocation for 2023/24 and 2024/25. This is what we were expecting, or rather fearing, but the fact that we have been preparing for it makes it no less damaging in an era of high inflation. Our Corporate Plan shows how we will respond to this severe real terms cut by increased efficiencies, income generation and tightening the focus of our work on three overriding priorities. As discussed in the budget workshops it will also be necessary over

the current year to reduce our fixed costs by some £1m pa. This process is now well underway.

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 Our **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**, which we are the only National Park to operate, raised a total of £2.59m in the financial year 2020/21. This is the highest ever and exceeds the second highest (£1.89m) from 2020/21. This 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 sizeable pot of funding for allocation by the SDNPA to projects across the National Park.

3.3 In accordance with England-wide regulations payments are made to our parishes from CIL receipts twice a year. In April 2022, £253k was distributed to 30 parishes/towns across the Park, providing Parish and Town Councils with important funds for improvements in their areas.

3.4 Turning to plan making, we have been working on the **Area Action Plan (AAP)** for Shoreham Cement Works. The draft Issues & Options version of the AAP was considered at Planning Committee in May and forms part of the agenda for Member consideration at this meeting. We are striving to reach new audiences by using digital engagement.

3.5 We been making plans to review our award winning **Local Plan**, which was adopted in 2019. The agenda for this meeting includes a paper which proposes triggering the Local Plan Review and adopting a new timetable for planning policy documents.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

4.1 The [Nature Recovery Green Paper](#) was published on 16 March alongside a statement on future Habitats Regulations Assessments, a consultation on Environmental Targets, and Guidance on achieving Nutrient Neutrality. The consultations ran until 11 May 2022 NPE led the collective response to which SDNPA has contributed.

4.2 The Green Paper could spark significant changes in how nature is protected, managed, and enhanced. A series of proposals are made in relation to habitats, species, and how nature conservation is managed and regulated in this country. A stated aim is to simplify and streamline environmental regulation. There are potentially significant implications for NPAs, their relationship with Defra Arms-Length Bodies, and for the implementation of the [Delivery Plan for Wildlife in National Parks](#). The proposals will impact on sites within National Parks, as will consideration of whether National Parks should be seen as contributing towards the 30 by 30 commitment. As local planning authorities, proposed changes to Habitats Regulation Assessments will be important. There is much reliance on a significant injection of private finance, so ensuring NPAs can tap into this is crucial if we are to make the most of new investment in nature.

4.3 The proposals have sparked widespread concern in the environment sector. Whilst there is acknowledgement that some sort of future proofing of the core sites (SSSIs, SACs, SPAs etc.) is needed in response to climate change, little evidence has been published that the current system is “broken” and that a new “simplified” approach would not be costly and distracting.

4.4 Returning to the SDNPA, our **Nature Recovery Work Programme** continues to be developed and implemented. The *Call for Nature Sites* has exceeded our expectations with 77 expressions of interest from landowners, land managers and communities ranging from large estates to single parishes. Having identified those which have immediate potential, we are now allocating a lead member of staff to act as facilitator/guides working with each. A carefully phased approach is being taken, mindful of our capacity and resource constraints.

4.5 The Call for Nature Sites is just one element of the Nature Recovery work programme, alongside projects within WEPs, farm clusters, our Forestry and Woodland work, planning cases where Net Gain in biodiversity will be required and existing ranger led initiatives. This

combination of approaches mean that we are taking a significant first step towards our Corporate Plan target to secure an additional 13,000 ha managed for nature by 2030.

- 4.6 Some **ReNature** initiatives will only require advice whilst others will be matched to the most appropriate funding mechanisms, including the Trust, FiPL and our own project investment. For example, the Trees for the Downs programme has already seen 21,000 trees planted since 2020, with the Trust purchasing the stock, the SDNPA providing advice and the recipient taking responsibility for planting and care. Meantime, 48 schools have each been supported with a grant of up to £150 to carry out ReNature- themed projects alongside an eco-art competition supported by The Boltini Trust. Finally, £65,000 has been secured from the Coast 2 Capital LEP to deliver a second private finance pilot alongside the one at Broadreed Farm. This brings the total funds for ReNature raised to date up to £430,000.
- 4.7 The **South Downs Partnership** (SDP) met on 26 April at the South Downs Centre. Although it has been meeting regularly since last year on Zoom, this was the first opportunity for the partners to meet face to face and it was a lively, positive and high energy event. The commitment, knowledge and enthusiasm of the group was palpable and it discussed the Defra consultation, the Trust and the high-level targets in the new Corporate Plan. One of the defining features of the SDP is that it brings together people who live and work in the National Park and manage its land with community leaders who represent parts of society which are not currently using or benefitting from our special landscape. There are opportunities, tensions and trade-offs here, which the Partnership can help us to navigate.
- 4.8 The **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** Programme was launched across all 44 Protected Landscapes (PLs) in England in July 2021. Administered locally by PL Teams, the Programme was developed to help farmers and land managers adapt and prepare for the new UK Agriculture Policy through projects that deliver one or more of the FiPL objectives – nature, climate, people and place.
- 4.9 March 2022 marked the end of year one of this three year Programme. During this first year SDNPA supported 68 projects covering some 41,415 ha of the Park that allocated 100% of our £588,381 year one budget. In addition, we were able to secure a further £40,671 from a 'national pot' in January that enabled support for a further four projects, taking the year one total of projects to 72 at an overall spend of £629,052. Taking into account that a number of these projects have been awarded funding over the three years, when applicant contributions and match funding are added the total investment for these projects is £1,170,545.
- 4.10 In terms of FiPL objective delivery for year one, 50 projects provided benefits for nature, 50 for climate, 35 for people and 52 for place. This included 2,349.7 ha of positive management on SSSIs, 4353.8 ha of land being managed with regenerative farming techniques, 29 projects that will provide opportunities for people to explore, enjoy and understand the landscape and 228m of flint walls being restored. The [headlines document](#) for year one FiPL delivery provides further figures/details.
- 4.11 FiPL has been a true partnership with the South Downs Farming community, working with 179 farmers and four farmer clusters. The Local Assessment Panel (LAP), consisting of seven farmer representatives (six from farmer clusters and one outside of the groups), and representatives from Natural England and the SDNPA, have scrutinised all applications to ensure value for money, project outcomes, and sustainability.
- 4.12 As we start year two delivery of the programme, £159,627 has already been allocated through multi annual agreements. We already have 114 expressions of interest for projects and are working with the LAP to identify and develop those that can build on achievements made in year one.
- 4.13 In the financial year just ended the **income generation team** secured £1.43m. This is a further £80,000 since my last report. This consists of a number of large major donations alongside a £30,000 gift aid claim made by the Trust. This significant claim underlines the importance of our charitable partner.

- 4.14 The team were disappointed not to be successful in securing the £500k Tree Call for Action fund, however, feedback from HLF suggested the application was faultless, falling victim to a competitive round which was ultimately decided on current Tree Coverage (with those in the lowest areas being prioritised). We can take comfort that there is likely to be new funding coming forward for Woodland Creation Partnerships in future and that we have been encouraged to apply.
- 4.15 With the new year just started, I am pleased to report we already have just under £200k secured or pledged, with over £4.5 million of outstanding opportunities. This includes the £2.2 million **Ouse Valley Climate Action bid**, which we submitted on 27 April. This application has itself been a 2 year project, with the original submission occurring during the first lock downs and much of the development done online during lockdowns. It is a partnership bid between the Authority and the Trust, with 10 partners and 100 community groups involved. This project underlines the huge amount of work involved to put together such bids but it presents the opportunity to create real momentum, delivering against all three of our corporate plan high level targets. I must record my thanks to James Winkworth, Emma Allen and Stephanie Mills who worked tirelessly on the submission. Now we hope for the successful outcome that it deserves.

5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 All Covid-19 restrictions on **Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) groups** have been removed in line with new SDNPA policies. In Q4 2021-22, 168 VRS volunteers contributed 3,581 hours for the National Park. These volunteer days were the last quarter undertaken with Covid-19 limits in place.
- 5.2 **South Downs Youth Action:** On Saturday 19 March, we hosted our final Generation Green residential with 13 young people from Castlecombe Youth Group in Bromley, South London. The young people were identified through our strong partnership with Clarion Housing and, for most, this was their first experience of visiting the South Downs. Activities included cycling along the Downslink from the Adur Centre, Shoreham, along with pond conservation activities, an adventure walk of the public footpaths, and stargazing in the blissfully dark night skies.
- 5.3 **Microvolunteering:** the SDNPA worked with the Universities of Brighton and Sussex and the Living Coast biosphere to deliver the 2022 City Nature Challenge in Brighton and the Eastern Downs (29 April to 2 May). This is a global community science initiative using the iNaturalist app/website to record as many species of wild plant, animal or fungus in Brighton and the Eastern Downs, as far west as the Arun at Amberley.

6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 On 1st April the **trading company (South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd)** took over management of Seven Sisters Country Park. They have had a busy but positive first month of trading with good visitor numbers which have generated strong sales, particularly food and beverages.
- 6.2 We have had a very busy month at **Seven Sisters** as we enter the final stages of our Phase 1 construction works. Our contractors and staff team worked hard to ensure we were ready for some Easter opening of our new buildings including our new toilet block which provides a significantly improved number of toilets as well as disabled and changing places toilet facilities. These will form part of a greatly improved visitor experience at the country park.
- 6.3 The Visitor Centre building has also now been completed and was opened to the public on Saturday 16 April showcasing our new interpretation and visitor information. The retail elements of the visitor centre have since been added and will evolve over time. The key changes to the Visitor Centre include an improved level floor, enabling full access and maximising space, as well as a log burner, retail displays and new glass doors with the shared identify. The Ranger office has been refurbished and Peter Cousin and his team will move into it in the coming weeks, leaving the Turkey Barn as meeting space.

- 6.4 Signage has been installed around Seven Sisters to improve visitor flow. One remaining sign will be installed later in June when we have completed works to the rear courtyard and Dairy Barn (the only outstanding works on the Phase I contract, due for completion on 16 June).
- 6.5 The Foxhole Cottages are partially complete with the remaining works due to be completed under a separate contract for Phase Ia works which will be finished by the end of 2022.
- 6.6 A report including the **EDI action plan** will be coming to the NPA in July, following on from Member training which is booked in June, over two dates to offer maximum the opportunity for good attendance.
- 7. Media and Communications**
- 7.1 Our **digital engagement** continues to grow with 3 websites and 11 social media channels supporting the work of engaging people with the National Park, Seven Sisters Country Park and the income generation of the South Downs National Park Trust. During March and April we had an average of just under 135,000 unique monthly visitors to our **SDNPA website**.
- 7.2 We now have over 66,000 followers across our **social media channels**. Some highlights include our Take the Lead posts on positive dog behaviour at this crucial time for young wildlife and livestock. One Take the Lead post alone reached over 20,000 people. We have also been using our digital channels to reach under represented audiences. Promotion of the latest Colour of Chalk podcast from our Writer in Residence, Alinah Azadeh reached over 11,000 people.
- 7.3 During **Discover National Parks fortnight** we focused on sustainable transport. The virtual fortnight enabled us to promote walking and cycling routes accessible by bus or train, as well as our vital Miles Without Stiles accessible routes. Our content reach was 136,471 and our videos were viewed over 6,000 times, with a strong engagement rate of over 10%. As part of the fortnight, we are running a competition where three young people (aged 18-25) could win the chance of a guided daytrip into the National Park with the fantastic Saira Niazi, who is also leading on our South Downs Community Wanderings project. Saira will be filming this daytrip for our social media channels in June.
- 7.4 This has been an important period to build our **online SSCP audience**, so that we can provide the digital gateway to the country park we promised, ensuring that visitors arrive armed with the information they need to make their visit positive for both themselves and the country park. In the last 7 weeks, we have had just under 49,000 unique visitors to the SSCP website.
- 7.5 **Nature recovery** and **National Parks for All** have been the main highlights of our media work as the spring season begins. We had 11 pieces of coverage about the success of the Trees for the Downs project, together with 17 media reports across the regional media covering the hugely positive impact of the Bee Lines project. The work of SDNPA and the Trust to connect children and young people to the South Downs has generated regular coverage, with extensive spreads in over 20 media outlets across Hampshire and Sussex. The story reached almost 1m people and had a PR value of over £57,000.
- 7.6 Since the start of the year, 437 people have signed up to our monthly e-newsletter, bringing the total subscription to 8,753.
- 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 24 March NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

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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