

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **20 October 2022**
By **Authority Chair**
Title of Report **Authority Chair Update**
Note

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Since our last NPA meeting we had the sad news of our Queen's passing and the period of mourning. I want to thank all the Authority for responding so well and respectfully. It was unfortunate that the Secrets of the Heath festival had to be cancelled and a Member's Day rearranged, but this was clearly the right thing to do. The Visitors centre at Seven Sisters Country Park and Grab & Go were closed for the day of the funeral.
- 1.2 There wasn't a Chair's report at our last NPA in July so I have a few acknowledgements I would like to extend.
- 1.3 Firstly, thanks to Ian Phillips for being Chair of the Authority from 2019-2022. Many thanks for steering the Authority through those two tricky Covid years. Ian is now Deputy Chair and part of the planning committee. He has been a wonderful support.
- 1.4 After the May 2022 local elections, we had a few changes to the membership. Russell Oppenheimer, who was our member from Hampshire County Council (HCC), was given a new role at HCC as Executive member for Countryside, culture and Communities, which meant he needed to step down from SDNPA. We wish him all the best in his new role and thank him for his service at South Downs NPA.
- 1.5 Debbie Curnow Ford joined us from HCC in June and we warmly welcome her to the Authority and look forward to working with her on the Planning Committee, workshops and NPA work.
- 1.6 One of our longest serving members, Barbara Holyome, a parish member for Hampshire, stepped back from her role as parish councillor and subsequently from the SDNPA. Barbara had been part of the South Downs family since the early, committee stages and I know her knowledge and insight will be missed by all. Best of luck Barbara!
- 1.7 We also send our condolences to Patrick Burridge's family for his recent passing. Patrick was a founding member of the Authority.

2. National Parks England

- 2.1 The Chairs of the 10 English National Parks have met informally twice since the beginning of September. There is real anxiety amongst the Chairs for the future of their Authorities as the reality of going into a fourth year of flat cash (set in 2019), together with rising inflation

mean difficult decisions. So far only two national Parks, ourselves and the Lakes, have gone through a re-structuring programme.

2.2 NPE are next due to meet in person on 3rd November in York.

3. Nature Recovery Workshop – 7th September

3.1 We had an inspiring and informative workshop updating us on the Nature Recovery work now happening in the Park. Presentations from Weald to Waves initiative (Landscape scale nature recovery project led by Knepp estate), the Waterhall Rewilding project led by Brighton & Hove City Council, the work at South Holt and the Botany Bay community group.

3.2 We were given the question “How can Members encourage action in their own local authorities and parishes?” Have we reflected on this? Can we share our actions and learn from each other?

4. All staff & Member Day at Seven Sisters CP – 20th September

4.1 Thank you to all who attended the first all staff and members day in person since 2019. We were very unlucky on the day that a serious accident on the A27 left the road shut outside Lewes which meant huge tailbacks and traffic which resulted in many enduring 6 hour or more journeys.

4.2 The day was spilt into two. The morning had a welcome and update from myself and Trevor Beattie followed by Achievements so far at Seven Sisters CP from Peter Cousin (Commercial Manager). The IT team updated us all on the real threats from cyber crime and the new two-step authentication regime the Authority is bringing. There are opportunities over the next few weeks for one to one training with the team on how to set this up on your devices. Richard Sandiford then gave us an overview on the good work the Culture Group has undertaken over the past year.

4.3 The afternoon saw staff explore the Country Park and facilities through a series of walks. Members had a session on the Trading Company and its relationship with the Authority.

5. NPUK Conference

5.1 The biannual National Parks UK conference took place last month, 25th to 27th September. Five members of SDNPA, myself, Ian Phillips, Heather Baker, Maggie Jones and Andrew Shaxson, together with Trevor Beattie and Andrew Lee attended. The event was hosted this time by Exmoor NPA and was based at Tithe Barn in Dunster Village, near Minehead on the North Somerset coast.

5.2 The first day started with a Chairs & CEO meeting of all 15 UK NPAs. The meeting was a chance for all National Parks to showcase a project that demonstrated their approach to the issue of Climate Change in their areas. These ranged from peat restoration projects to sustainable transport scheme. The SDNPA submitted the Ouse Valley Climate Action project as a fantastic example of communities and partners working together over a large area with the combined goal of nature recovery and climate adaptation.

5.3 The evening event had speakers from the National Park Partnerships providing us with an update on new financing opportunities, alongside inspirational talks from Soraya at All The Elements and the work she is doing with regards to diversity and inclusion. Exmoor NPA's two youth ambassadors then spoke about their work with the NPA and what young people would like from National Parks – more opportunities to be involved in policy making and a plea for youth orientated pages on the NP websites.

5.4 The second day involved a series of study tours, which delegates were split into. These ranged from a trip to Porlock Marshes as an example of Managing Change to a visit to Lynmouth focusing on the rural economy.

5.5 Our last morning consisted of a panel discussion, which included Minette Batters (NFU) and Tony Juniper (NE). Minette gave a barn stomping speech, off the back of a weekend of criticism in the press.

- 5.6 I want to thank the members and officers above for giving up their time to attend. There was learning to take away but also a lot of unanswered questions.
- 5.7 Thanks to Exmoor NPA for a wonderful welcome and few days of engagement, discussion and inspiration.

6. Meeting with Elected Members

- 6.1 By now, I would have held 4 meetings across the Park with those Members from the local authorities that are found in and around the Park's boundaries. These have been really productive meetings where we've focused on issues that have local significance. These have ranged from tourism and visitor management to wetland management, water quality and housing.
- 6.2 We as members consider ourselves champions of the National Park and our Local Authority members play an important role as conduits between the two authorities. The SDNPA PowerPoint presentation has been updated and is ready to use by Members to present to their authorities and reinvigorate the dialogue between each other. Members will then present their feedback and observations at a P&R committee meeting. Thank you for your support and enthusiasm.

7. Sustainable Communities Panel

- 7.1 Doug Jones is chair of the Sustainable Communities panel. The Panel, which is mainly comprised of experts from outside SDNPA (including representatives of the Trust), considered 3 projects at its meeting in September: they were all very strong and innovative and each was addressing very different challenges and opportunities.
- 7.2 They awarded grants to all 3 of them and each showed how we can make a direct and immediate difference on the ground through our SCF awards:
1. The Petersfield Trees and Bees Project was seeking a grant to help volunteers look after newly-planted trees and pollinator plots as they are established in green spaces in the town. The recent dry weather had only highlighted the need to help any newly-planted trees get established, including by regular watering and aftercare. The project will provide mobile water bowser equipment which will enable volunteers to visit sites to tend and water them. The initiative also plans to utilise sustainable sources of water by capturing rainfall from a number of sites – and the mobile bowser equipment will be made available to other local communities and groups.
 2. The second grant was to help the local villagers reopen Selborne Stores as a Community Shop with an emphasis on providing a hub for vulnerable and isolated people through the winter months as well as supplying sustainable produce and working with local farmers. An impressive amount of local fund-raising had been achieved.
 3. The third award was to the Sussex Bat Group and a national NGO – the Vincent Wildlife Trust – for sensitive work at a site where there is a roost for Greater Horseshoe bats. This species has dwindled from an estimated 300,000 individuals across Britain to a mere 2,000 – and none had been recorded in this area for 100 years until this roost was discovered recently. The site is now the easternmost roost in the country and, once carefully repaired and restored, it could become a stepping stone for the recolonisation of Greater Horseshoes from their stronghold in the South West and South Wales across the South and South-East of England. It is, therefore, one of the UK's most important roosts and the project will also help other species, too.

8. Summer Events

- 8.1 Myself and other Members supported the officers this summer with stints on the events van as it toured within the Park, but also importantly getting out, to those urban areas on our fringes. I greatly enjoyed my days on Hove Seafront and in Lewes town centre. Thank you to those who participated.

9. Activities by members representing the NPA

9.1 Therese Evans attended the ceremony at Winchester Cathedral in early July on behalf of the Authority for the 2022 Gold Award Holders' Reception and Debbie Curnow Ford stepped in at the last minute to attend the Hampshire Rural Forum in July. Many thanks both.

10. Conclusion

I am happy to respond to any questions that may arise from this update and will provide any further updates as needed at the meeting.

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Head of Governance.
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None