

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **20 October 2022**  
By **Chief Executive Officer**  
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 and the policy developments that have taken place since my report to the 5 July 2022 NPA.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1 The new Defra Ministerial team under Secretary of State Ranil Jayawardena has now been confirmed, with Mark Spencer as Minister of State and three Parliamentary Under Secretaries – Trudy Harrison, Scott Mann and Lord Benyon, who is Minister for Rural Affairs, Access to Nature and Biosecurity.

2.2 At the time of writing, the Defra website still does not include details of the responsibilities of each Minister but I understand that Lord Benyon will continue to be responsible for National Parks and AONBs. This continuity is welcome since he is a knowledgeable and long-standing champion of all Protected Landscapes. In his speech to the Conservative party conference the Secretary of State said that Trudy Harrison was Minister for the Environment, Mark Spencer was Minister for Food, and Scott Mann was Minister for Growth. We have still to work out what this will mean in practice but these three topics were the theme of a speech that emphasised economic growth and food security.

2.3 The Secretary of State said that “instead of being a regulatory department, we are now an economic growth department”. This is cause for concern since his Department is, of course, heavily involved in environmental regulation. In the decades during which the UK was part of the EU, the vast majority of environmental legislation was developed at a Europe wide level. Many of the key pieces of legislation took the form of EU Directives which set overall objectives and outcomes, but left each member state the flexibility to transpose the Directive into national law as it saw fit. For example, this model applies to two of the most fundamental measures relevant in National Parks: the Habitats Directive and the Water Framework Directive. The former sought to protect the most important habitats and species by establishing a pan-European network of protected sites (called SACs) along with measures to protect mobile and migratory species. The latter established the goal that river catchments and freshwater bodies should achieve Good Ecological Status and their management should engage all relevant local stakeholders. In both cases the aim has been to

establish a level playing field across the EU for citizens, business and industry, creating regulatory certainty, preventing polluting businesses undercutting clean ones, or one member state gaining unfair advantage by undercutting regulatory standards to attract inward investment.

- 2.4 Now the UK has left the EU, Defra in particular faces the very significant task of disaggregating decades of EU wide law and replacing it (or not) with national legislation. This will be done through the *Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill*, with at least 470 pieces of legislation involved, and the Government has stated its intention to ‘sunset’ all retained EU laws on 31 December 2023. The Bill emerged alongside the growth plan and has been pitched as part of a deregulation agenda, with environmental protections described as “burdens”.
- 2.5 This has provoked a strong reaction from many quarters. Whilst some industry groups have welcomed what they see as a bonfire of red tape, others have written to Ministers warning against undermining regulatory certainty and the risk of sending confused signals to businesses and markets about the sorts of growth Britain wants. The lack of clarity of intention with this Bill, along with confusion about the future of the ELM scheme, means that speculation is currently rife. More immediately, it means many landowners and farmers in the South Downs are unclear about the implications of all this for their own businesses and the choices they need to make about intensification of food production on the one hand versus nature recovery and a more regenerative approach to agriculture on the other.
- 2.6 I hope that the coming weeks will bring both clarity and reassurance. In this respect it is important to note that the Secretary of State’s speech also promised that “we remain committed to our environmental schemes that support our farmers as they look after our countryside”.
- 2.7 Another area where clarity is urgently needed is the plans of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Deluhc) for light touch Investment Zones (IZs) where planning rules and other regulations are lifted to stimulate growth and unlock housing. Far from exempting National Parks, AONBs and other environmental protections, the guidance issued on 2 October simply asked applicants to note whether the proposed development would be on land that includes them. After widespread calls for clarification Simon Clarke, the new Secretary of State at Deluhc, issued the following tweet about inclusion of National Parks: “this categorically won’t be happening. Investment Zones are about targeted sites for growth where local authorities want them and where government then signs off. This would NOT be in a National Park. The reason the expression of interest form asks about whether a site is in a National Park or other protected area is precisely to prevent IZs being designated in these areas”. Now we need him to repeat this in Parliament.
- 2.8 I think this saga arose from a continuing lack of join up between Defra and Deluhc, not from any deliberate intention. Now that we have protected National Parks we need to establish that AONBs are also excluded, along with SACs, SPAs and RAMSAR sites. This is essential since there is likely to be a big overlap between landscape and environmental protections and proposed IZs, particularly in more deprived coastal areas which also have significant environmental assets.

### 3. Planning

- 3.1 The year end **planning performance** was subject to a comprehensive report at Policy and Resources Committee on 22 September so I will keep my comments in this respect short. I am pleased to report that planning performance in the current financial year continues to be good, with all government targets being met and a continuing strong record at appeal. This is despite a relatively high number of vacancies in our planning team, which we are committed to filling whilst in the meantime making use of temporary consultants. The shortage of qualified planners in the South East is an issue across our region that is not confined to the public sector.

- 3.2 In July Planning Committee adopted our **Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)**. The SPD provides the Authority's interpretation of design policies in the local plan and national policies. It sets out the Authority's expectations for design quality in new development and is a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications. The Design Guide SPD was drawn up with extensive Member involvement through a number of Task and Finish Group meetings.
- 3.3 In September Planning Committee approved the use of £1.95m in **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)** funding for 38 projects that benefit the National Park, its people and its habitats. The projects funded span the length and breadth of the National Park. In addition, payments will be made in October directly to Parishes where CIL chargeable development has occurred in the last six months and we will be disbursing approximately £280k to 27 town and parish councils.
- 3.4 Projects that have been recently completed using monies awarded by the Authority's CIL include the Fernhurst Sports Pavilion, access and ecological improvements to the nature reserve managed by Lewes Railway Land Trust and a new playground in Findon.
- 3.5 Further projects have been funded via money held from **Section 106 agreements** secured through the planning system, although in general this is gradually being superseded by CIL receipts. Projects recently funded in this way include solar panels on affordable housing dwellings in Sheet, 10 new affordable homes in Wickham by Wickham Community Land Trust (part SDNPA funded) and a new playground at Bell Lane Recreation Ground in Lewes.
- 3.6 The decision to start work on a targeted **review of the adopted Local Plan** was made at a full Authority meeting in May. Since then we have run a Call for Sites, started work on the Land Availability Assessment and commissioned a Housing and Development Needs Assessment (HEDNA). We wrote to all our town and parish councils in June asking them to work with us on the Local Plan Review rather than prepare reviews of their neighbourhood plans. We also asked them to submit sites for the Land Availability Assessment. At the same time, we have been working on the Area Action Plan for Shoreham Cement Works. We consulted on the Issues & Options version of the Plan over the summer and received over two thousand sets of comments.
- 3.7 We are now considering a merger of the two plans for a number of reasons. There is great uncertainty both nationally with the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and locally with water neutrality, which affects the Shoreham Cement Works Site, as does potential changes to the status of Area Action Plans. There are also temporary resourcing issues in the Planning Policy team. Whilst a final decision will be the subject of formal papers and discussion at Planning Committee and finally at NPA in December, it is likely that there will be a delay of about eighteen months to the Local Plan Review. A new Local Development Scheme will be presented to Members for agreement at the meeting.
- 3.8 There is a **Member workshop on the Local Plan Review** on 17 November to which all Members are invited. This is the first of a number of workshops on the Local Plan Review. The agenda is yet to be finalised, but we will discuss the emerging timetable, early findings on housing need and key cross boundary strategic issues.
- 3.9 The Prime Minister used her first major policy address to announce an end to the moratorium on **fracking** in England alongside a new licensing round for oil and gas projects in the North Sea. Up to the moratorium, direct drilling in National Parks was not allowed but lateral drilling from outside was permitted. The shale oil in the Weald Basin that extends into the National Park is much less viable than shale gas so we are less vulnerable to speculative fracking applications. The Prime Minister stated that local support would be required for fracking to be permitted, but she did not clarify how that support would need to be demonstrated. We have not received any indication that the current ban on drilling for fracking in National Parks will be lifted or changed and will continue to press for the retention of this vital exemption.

#### 4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The **South Downs Nature Recovery Programme** continues, as was highlighted in a series of presentations, including external speakers, at the Member Workshop on Nature Recovery on 7-September. We are focused on working with the applicants of the 31 “green” initiatives in the **Call for Nature Sites (C4NS)**. Following the EoI assessment process these are deemed as the most straightforward “quick wins”. There are another 28 “amber” initiatives which are inherently more complex or need more time to work up.
- 4.2 To date we have awarded 4 **Beelines** grants which equate to £12,000 for pollinator projects. Unfortunately a fifth initiative has been delayed due to the landowner’s lack of capacity. There are 7 **Trees for the Downs** initiatives progressing with another 5 already in the pipeline for 2023.
- 4.3 **Our South Downs** is an SDNPA initiative to build a community of micro and small businesses who share the same values around sustainability into a local network group to promote stronger and shorter rural supply chains in pursuit of sustainability. The initiative focusses on supporting businesses in their plans for nature recovery, climate action and a more diverse and inclusive National Park. Since its launch on 19 May this new business community has enjoyed a steady increase in its membership, which now totals 99. A monthly newsletter currently reaches 692 subscribers.
- 4.4 Work continues to progress in collaboration with the SDNP Trust to produce a series of **Corporate Donation Initiatives**. These include the South Downs Guardian which, for a modest annual fee, recognises a business as an official Guardian of the South Downs; South Downs National Park Protector which, for a more substantial amount, creates a package of benefits for businesses; and the ‘Plant a Tree’ Initiative which provides businesses with the opportunity to contribute to the ‘Trees for the Downs’ campaign.
- 4.5 Phase 2 of the development of **Green South Downs (GSD)**, the sustainability accreditation programme for businesses, is now well underway with over 20 businesses expressing interest to take part in the pilot that is due to run from October 2022 to January 2023. The selected pilot businesses will become the first cohort to achieve a Green South Downs Award in April 2023 when GSD officially launches.

#### 5. Volunteers and Delivery

- 5.1 **Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS):** In the first part of Q2 2022-23, 113 volunteers contributed 1,146 hours for the National Park. New volunteer recruitment is currently paused in most areas as we refocus our volunteer support following the recent staff changes and await the recommendations in the upcoming Volunteer Review.
- 5.2 **SDNPA Volunteer Review:** The evidence-gathering phase of the review is now complete. SDNPA officers and the VRS Chair attended a Review and Recommendation workshop with Heritage Insider in September to guide the final report, which is due for completion at the end of this month. An action plan to guide volunteer involvement across the organisation will be developed following the adoption of the review recommendations.
- 5.3 Delivery of the **South Downs Youth Action (SDYA)** programme for 2022/23 is well underway. Five SDYA days have been held so far this quarter including a heathland wildlife survey at Kingsley Common, reptile conservation at Iping Common and a wildlife bioblitz at Seven Sisters Country Park. We have also supported Youth Action groups from Action for Conservation at Arundel Park, Make Good Trouble at Seven Sisters Country Park and Yellow Brick Road on the River Rother.

#### 6. Corporate Update

- 6.1 I last reported on **Income Generation** in May. The months preceding this have been exceptionally busy with a number of large applications submitted. Our position has improved greatly with £2.9m currently secured (an increase of £2.7 million) and £2.4m still remaining in warm opportunities. Within the secured figure are two significant lottery applications, which have both progressed over the past months.

- 6.2 Our £1.3m HLF application, **Downs to the Sea** has received £130k funding for a 12 month development phase. Whilst this is still a competitive process, the chances of securing the full funding are now very good. The grant, which is a partnership project, would further our Corporate Plan through the restoration and protection of crucial ponds and wetlands, whilst promoting the health and wellbeing benefits of engaging with nature to underserved audiences.
- 6.3 I am pleased to report that our £2m **Ouse Valley Climate Action bid** has been successful. The project, which was several years in the making, sits at the heart of our Corporate Plan, focusing on three key areas: nature recovery and climate resilience; knowledge and skills; and greener energy and travel. After a lengthy application process and elongated negotiations around grant conditions, we are now entering the delivering of phase of this important project.
- 6.4 In other successes, we secured £50k for a new **Waymaking trail** in Eastbourne, linking the “Town to the Downs” and additional support, via the Trust, for our increasing National Park Grant Funds. These include Beelines, Trees for the Downs and ReNature, with a new fund focused on Dew Ponds launching in the coming months.
- 6.5 Several applications of note are pending, including the reworking of our Tree Call to Action bid for the new Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund and additional SELEPS funding for Seven Sisters phase 1a. We are expecting the results of these in the coming months.
- 6.6 Our **Lapwings and Landscapes bid** to the Defra Nature Recovery Pilots was not successful. With a high position on the reserve list and some practical feedback that we can act on, we hope to re-submit this project to future rounds.

## 7. **Media and Communications**

- 7.1 Despite a digital and media blackout for over a week in honour of HM The Queen’s passing, the reach of our digital and media work has continued to grow during this last quarter. Between July and September, over 413,000 unique users visited our **website**. The warm weather obviously generated a keen interest in getting outdoors as our most popular pages were our walking trails, South Downs Way and Great Days Out.
- 7.2 Our **social media** followers now total 69,000, with biodiversity and landscape proving the most popular posts. Web visitors have also seen real growth, with visitors to the SSCP website almost doubling in the last quarter. Our monthly e-newsletter continues to be very popular with over 9,000 subscribers.
- 7.3 It has been a strong summer for **printed and broadcast media**, particularly around nature recovery success stories. The significant impact of Bee Lines in bringing back pollinators, backed up by early scientific data, achieved more than 200 pieces of coverage nationally, including The Times, Daily Express, I Paper, Evening Standard, Mail, ITV, and a clutch of big city publications such as Birmingham Mail and Sheffield Star, as well as local outlets such as BBC Sussex.
- 7.4 The National Park’s focus on nature recovery was covered by ITN national evening news, with the broadcast going out to over 4m viewers filmed from Seven Sisters. Our campaign during the heatwave to ban the sale of disposable barbecues achieved national attention, including my interview with Sky News. We have also had strong local coverage about the wellbeing benefits of getting outside into the National Park.

## 8. **Conclusion**

- 8.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 5 July 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; Head of Governance.

External Consultees None

Background Documents N/A