

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **14 December 2022**
By **Chair of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited**
Title of Report **Update on South Downs Commercial Operations Limited**
Note

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the progress made by South Downs Commercial Operations Limited.

1. Summary and background

- 1.1 South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (“the Company”) was set up by the SDNPA as a Teckal Company on 23 July 2021. An Operating Agreement and Business Plan were agreed in March 2022.
- 1.2 This report updates the Authority on the progress the Company has made in the last year.

2. Progress over the last year

- 2.1 Operational highlights: The Company took over operation of Seven Sisters Country Park on 1 April 2022 whilst the Phase 1 project was still ongoing. The visitor centre and new toilet block opened to the public on the Easter weekend. The grab and go opened to the public in late May.
- 2.2 The original 22-23 business plan approved by the members budgeted for a Y1 operational loss of -£115,748. Due to later than budgeted openings of some of the components alongside an improved understanding of the site’s operations, we undertook a reforecasting exercise in July which predict finishing the year on -£133,814, £18,067 behind the original business plan.
- 2.3 The 8 months of operation so far have been a reminder of the weather dependency of the site. July with its complete lack of rain saw budgets considerably exceeded, whilst September and November, which saw far above average rainfall resulted in disappointing incomes.
- 2.4 There are currently 6 members of full time staff seconded from SDNPA to the Company, 2 apprentices and a team of casual staff.
- 2.5 The Visitor Centre has welcomed at least 33,222 visitors, an average of 162 every day (to 29 Nov) and as of the end of October, at least 171,002 people had walked down the concrete track towards the beach. The average spend per head in the visitor centre is £0.99 and our estimated average spend per visitor for the whole site is £0.53.
- 2.6 Visitor surveys were carried out and all respondents rated their level of enjoyment as high or very high (majority were very high).

- 2.7 Phase I: The building works at Exceat were completed in May of this year; this included new offices, toilets, grab and go, rainwater harvesting, air source heat pumps, landscaping and a refurbished visitor centre.
- 2.8 Work at Foxholes is ongoing with an estimated completion of 23 December. The works have created 3 holiday cottages, a warden's flat and a new facilities block to serve the camping barn and campsite.
- 2.9 Landscape improvements: We have continued our delivery of the Landscape Management Plan. We carried out summer grazing of the wet grasslands using Sussex and Hereford Cattle and have now begun winter grazing of the chalk grassland with a mixture of Ponies and Cattle.
- 2.10 Wins have included; 6 Short Eared Owls overwintering, the return of the very rare Red Star Thistle, significant increase of birds of prey with 6 Kestrels, 8 Buzzards and 3 Barn Owls spotted in a single day. A rare Sea Aster Bee colony was found, as was a good population of Ivy Mining Bees.
- 2.11 The 4.8 mile circular 'County Park Trail' was created and opened to the public improving access to less visited areas of the site.
- 2.12 Miles of fencing and multiple gates/stiles have been removed to improve access.

3. Future work

- 3.1 The pump barn has been refurbished and on the 10 and 11 of December a Christmas Market with approximately 30 stallholders will/did take place. This is hoped to be the first of many similar events in the pump barn, which will include markets, cinema screenings, wine/beer/spirit tasting evenings, plays and conferences. The hope is that this will create a less weather dependant income.
- 3.2 We are intending to open the holiday accommodation at Foxholes to the public in April 2023, In January we will put out an invitation to tender for contractors to work with us in delivering this.
- 3.3 The team are in the process of producing the business plan for 2023/24, which will be agreed in March and will utilise learnings from our first year of operations.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The aim of this report has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the Company's work over the past year and a similar report will be brought before the Authority on an annual basis.

STEPHEN WHALE

Chair of the Board of Directors

South Downs Commercial Operations Limited

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