

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **14 December 2022**  
By **Chief Executive Officer**  
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**

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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 20 October NPA.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 My last report described the new Defra Ministers under Secretary of State Ranil Jayawardena who have now of course been replaced by a new team under Secretary of State Thérèse Coffey. The shift meant that Lord Benyon, the long standing Minister with responsibility for National Parks, has been promoted to Minister of State and has passed responsibility for National Parks and AONBs to junior Minister Trudy Harrison, who is MP for Copeland.
- 2.2 Trudy Harrison's title is "Minister for Natural Environment and Land Use", with a huge brief which includes the domestic natural environment, wildlife and land use, climate change adaptation, forestry and access, so we will now be a smaller part of a much larger portfolio. Her background is relevant, however, since before election to Parliament she worked as a Community Regeneration Officer at Copeland Borough Council and then as a programme manager for investors specialising in renewable energy and sustainable community projects. She has already visited Northumberland National Park and we have issued an open invitation to visit the South Downs.
- 2.3 Rishi Sunak announced in his first PM's Questions on 26 October that he was committed to the ban on fracking set out in the 2019 Conservative election manifesto. I hope we can now consolidate the ban and move on.
- 2.4 The progress of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill through Parliament has been delayed due to threatened revolts by government backbenchers around the removal of the ban on onshore windfarms and the abolition of housing targets. I understand that Levelling up Secretary Michael Gove is in negotiations to seek compromises that will allow the Bill to progress. This is important since amendments to the Bill are Defra's preferred route to making the legislative changes set out in their response to the Glover Review, particularly the strengthened S62 duty and the new purposes. The Bill also contains provisions to strengthen the regime on sewage treatment.
- 2.5 The Chancellor's Autumn Statement on 17 November confirmed that Departmental budgets will be maintained at least in line with the budgets set at the 2021 spending review, which

announced that Defra's total budget will grow from £6.6bn to £7.1bn in cash terms. The Chancellor also announced that all existing investment zone proposals will be dropped and the policy will be switched to benefit research clusters.

- 2.6 On the day after the Autumn Statement, I met senior Defra officials for the Department's annual review meeting of SDNPA. This was a detailed assessment of our progress over the past year, our achievements against target and our future plans. SDNPA was given a clean bill of health and the Department commented favourably on the breadth of the activities we have undertaken, our project delivery (particularly around FiPL and #ReNature) and our success in planning delivery and income generation.
- 2.7 I took the opportunity presented by the annual review meeting to ask if SDNPA's two year flat cash settlement was going to be reviewed in the light of the Autumn Statement and was told that it was possible that there would be further grant cuts over the next two years. Members will be discussing the implications of this at the budget workshops on 14 December and 31 January. I stressed that it was important to have confirmation of our grant settlement as soon as possible and was told that this should be provided by mid-January, which will be just in time for our second budget workshop,
- 2.8 Since the annual review meeting I have continued to press the case for additional resources with Defra as well as speaking out in public about the severe consequences of five years of flat cash grant settlements. It is helpful for our partners and communities to know about the cuts we have been forced to make and the potential impact on our operations of further cuts.

### 3. Planning

- 3.1 **Planning performance** in the current financial year continues to be good, with all government targets being met and a continuing strong record at appeal.
- 3.2 The Planning Policy Team have been working on the **Area Action Plan (AAP) for Shoreham Cement Works** and the **Local Plan Review**. A report is with Members today with a recommendation to merge the two Plans. This is in response to changes to national policy, uncertainty over water neutrality and reduced resourcing at the Authority. It is likely that there will be a delay of between 12 to 18 months to the timetable of the Local Plan Review and consequently a revised Local Development Scheme is also being considered today. A well-attended Local Plan Review Member Workshop was held on 17 November, which considered the merger of the two Plans, the emerging evidence on housing and economic needs and our strategic cross boundary priorities.
- 3.3 Turning to major projects, the submission by National Highways of the Development Consent Order application for the upgrade to **Junction 9 of the M3** is expected before the end of the year. If the application is accepted by the Planning Inspectorate a statutory 6 month examination period will start and officers will prepare a written representation for consideration by Members.

### 4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The South Downs **Nature Recovery Programme** continues to deliver action for ReNature and Core Nature through a variety of mechanisms. We have registered over 330 initiatives on the nature recovery log, each of which is contributing towards both the ReNature and Core Nature Corporate Plan targets.
- 4.2 As an example we are currently tracking a total of up to approximately 140ha of habitat creation from the **C4NS initiatives** being funded through Beelines, Trees for the Downs and the ReNature Grant. The Trees for the Downs schemes equate to over 3,000 trees. We are currently also in discussion with a number of landowners over the role green finance (eg from Biodiversity Net Gain or Nitrate Neutrality) could play in proposals on strategic sites that meet our Nature Recovery aspirations. These involve approximately 2,700 further hectares. This is an exciting and innovative area and I look forward to providing more detail in future reports which will include figures from other delivery mechanisms such as FiPL, other funded projects and planning.

- 4.3 Both Beelines and Trees for the Downs are now open to applications for delivery in 2023/24. The new SDNPA Biodiversity Officer has now started in post to provide further resource for this work.
- 4.4 We still await the Regulations and Guidance for the **Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)**, however readiness planning is underway through the Tier 1 Responsible Authorities. SDNPA has been invited to be part of the LNRS Board for Hampshire and the Steering Group for the West Sussex, East Sussex and Brighton and Hove strategies.
- 4.5 **Income Generation** continues a run of success with the National Grid LEI funding secured for Butcherlands, next to Ebernoe Common, which Andrew Lee was able to announce at the last NPA. This takes secured income up to £3,023,000 for the current year, from £2,900,810 in November.
- 4.6 “Warm” opportunities have reduced from £2,387,000 to £1,553,000. The main reason for this is the removal of the unsuccessful Defra Landscapes Recovery Bid, which we hope to have an opportunity to resubmit in the new year. The income generation team are now focused on supporting our significant successes into delivery, though we continue to submit a number of strategic applications, such as the Net Zero Living Pioneer Places Award which could help deliver our Climate Change Action Plan by creating a Park wide monitoring framework.

## 5. **Volunteers and Delivery**

- 5.1 We have received the final **SDNPA Volunteer Review** report and recommendations. These have been shared with key staff, the VRS Committee and VRS volunteers. A working group consisting of staff and the chair of the VRS Committee has been established to take forward the implementation work as we evolve our volunteering model from January 2023 onwards. The first steps will be to establish a vision for volunteering supported by the SDNPA and an action plan for the next 12 months. We are in the process of securing part-time consultancy resource to support this work.

## 6. **Corporate Update**

- 6.1 Since September we have advertised 14 **vacancies**. Nine have been successfully recruited to date, five of which resulted in internal promotions. The remaining posts are currently at advertising or interview stages and due to be completed before Christmas. All of our recruitment campaigns have been successful so far with the exception of Senior DM Officers since there is a national shortage of such planners. We have been successful in seeking to fill the gaps in the short term by recruiting consultants who are familiar with the National Park or experienced in specialist areas, but this is not a long term solution. We are also recruiting at the next level down and developing the skills of more junior planning staff so that they can move up into the vacant positions. In addition we are planning another round of advertising with a tighter focus on the specialist media.
- 6.2 Climate Action is one of the priority programmes within our current Corporate Plan. We have reviewed our previous **Climate Change Action Plan** to ensure it remains a good fit with our wider strategic and corporate plan priorities in the light of recent organisational changes. As a result we will establish a Climate Action Working Group on the same basis as the Nature Recovery group, to convene the programme leads from across the Authority and facilitate joint-working. The group will meet for the first time in January 2023.
- 6.3 The Climate Change Action Plan went to P&R Committee on 24 November for final approval. The Plan will form the basis of our activities for 2023/24. It restates our commitment to meeting the challenge of the joint Climate and Nature crises and to achieving our ambitious Net-Zero targets through nature-based solutions.
- 6.4 In summary, the priority areas for the revised Climate Change Action Plan are:
- Working with the wider National Parks family to establish NPAs as leaders in meeting the challenge presented by Climate Change;
  - Delivering ‘Net Zero with Nature’, linking Nature Recovery and Climate Action;

- Delivering Climate Action through the Planning System;
- Supporting the land-based sector to transition to a low-carbon future;
- Working with our local communities, supporting them to become more resilient;
- Working with our Local Authorities and sector partners to deliver positive action;
- Supporting rural businesses to adapt their business operations and transition to a low-carbon economy.

These priority areas reflect the steer from P&R Committee, and focus on the areas where the National Park Authority can have the greatest impact.

- 6.5 We are making plans to host our first ever **South Downs Summit** in 2024. The plan is to hold this biennial event for policy and decision makers across the sector to showcase the innovative work happening across the National Park and to progress discussion and partnership working on our key priorities areas.
- 6.6 Following the review of **Member meetings and events** earlier this year a new schedule of Strategic Events has been put in place. The next of these events will include the Budget Workshops for the 2023/24 financial year that I have already mentioned. All Members will be aware of the current financial pressures facing all National Park Authorities and I would like to underline the importance of Member engagement in these workshops before formal approval of the budget at the March NPA meeting.
- 6.7 The next Authority Strategic Day on 19 January will focus on our National Park for All priority, looking at opportunities to create new links from Eastbourne onto the downs and the other sites in the area, as well as celebrating art and cultural heritage. Another rapidly developing area of opportunity is the growing market in carbon and nutrient offsetting. The afternoon of 31 January will therefore focus on the delivery of this green financing. We have rescheduled the planning tour that was cancelled earlier in the year due to the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It will now take place on 11 May.

## 7. **Media and Communications**

- 7.1 It has been a busy autumn for **print, online and broadcast media**, with plenty of uplifting proactive stories around nature recovery, cultural heritage and youth engagement and more hard-hitting pieces around the difficult funding position facing National Parks.
- 7.2 The financial challenges facing SDNPA were covered extensively in local and regional media, including BBC South East, BBC South and BBC Radio Sussex. Nationally, the story was featured in *Country Life* and also in *The Guardian*, both print and online.
- 7.3 **Spooky South Downs**, celebrating folklore and cultural heritage, gained a lot of traction locally and nationally, including pieces in the Portsmouth News, Sussex World and a national syndication across the UK for the lifestyle brand British Life.
- 7.4 The launch of more funding for the **Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) programme** was covered by Farmers Weekly, while smaller projects were also publicised, such as a piece in the Brighton Argus on teenagers with mental health and isolation issues being able to access the National Park.
- 7.5 November finished with a big update on **Trees for the Downs** as part of the ReNature campaign. The story, which focused on the nature recovery and climate change opportunities from the Woodland Opportunity Map, has garnered over 150 hits nationally, including the *Evening Standard*, *Mail Online* and *Independent*.
- 7.6 Our **digital audiences** continue to grow, and in the last year we added over 8,000 followers to our SDNPA social media channels, up to over 76,000, while the following on our SSCP social media channels has nearly trebled to 4,390.
- 7.7 The **new interpretation at Queen Elizabeth Country Park**, which SDNPA helped to fund, features information on the National Park and the shared identity. We also continue to advocate public transport and are in discussions with a number of train stations, including Seaford in the east and Shawford in the West, to feature information on 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 20 October 2022 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	N/A

