

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **30 March 2023**  
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 since my report to the 14 December 2022 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

2.1 On 1 March each National Park CEO received a letter from Trudy Harrison, the Defra Minister for Natural Environment and Land Use, to say that in recognition of the "challenging financial circumstances" faced by NPAs she is able to provide a one-off supplementary cash injection at the end of this financial year. This amounts to a very welcome £440k for each English National Park. The Minister's letter says "we value the contribution you make in protecting these precious places. .... The government remains committed to supporting our National Parks and ensuring that you can continue to support thriving local communities and economies, improve our public health and wellbeing, drive forward nature recovery, and build our resilience to climate change".

2.2 This one-off supplement is extremely welcome, even though it does not address the on-going challenge of meeting our running costs at a time of escalating costs. It should not be used to fund staff or other recurring expenditure that increases the long-term costs of the Authority but it will allow us to replace some of the project expenditure that has been eroded over the last three years,

2.3 A week later, on 8 March, we finally received confirmation from Defra of our grant for 2023/24 at the flat cash level that we have been expecting. Although this is not good news at a time of high inflation, at least it is the level for which we have been planning in the two budget workshops, so we are well prepared for the impact. Official confirmation removes one of the big uncertainties we have been managing and clears the way for today's budget setting discussion, which will also include plans for the additional £440k.

2.4 On 19 January the independent **Office for Environment Protection** (OEP) reported that the country is facing a "deeply concerning decline in biodiversity". Chaired by Dame Glenys Stacey, the OEP was set up under the 2021 Environment Act to hold the government and other public bodies to account. Its report identified "*a frequent failure*" by the government to meet its own legally-binding targets and concluded that "*progress on delivery of the 25 Year*

*Environment Plan has fallen far short of what is needed to meet government's ambition to leave the environment in a better state for future generations".*

- 2.5 Just twelve days later, Defra published its **Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP)**. This is the first such document and is the formal response of the Department to the OEP, and as such an important milestone against which to assess progress towards Government targets in its 25 Year Plan such as 30 by 30 (Nature) and Net Zero (Carbon). The report runs to over 250 pages and is a mix of previous announcements, target setting and some new commitments. It does start to flesh out the 30 by 30 commitment by adding interim milestones or sub-targets.
- 2.6 There is very little about the Glover Report and the role that Protected Landscapes (PLs) are to play in delivering government priorities. The part on designated sites (SSSIs) is especially weak. These are England's Crown Jewels yet all it says is that they will have an up-to-date condition assessment by January 2028 and that 50% of SSSIs should have "actions on track" to achieve favourable condition by then.
- 2.7 The reaction to the EIP from many quarters was frustration and disappointment, and coverage was swamped by a raft of other environmental stories. These include widespread criticism of the Retained EU Law (REUL) Bill and the risk therein of dismantling vital protections for nature, water and air quality etc, and multiple articles, stories and campaigns about the state of our rivers and illegal sewage dumping. It will be interesting to see whether the screening of "Wild Isles", and the associated campaign by WWF and RSPB, can generate further environmental commitments in the run up to the May elections.

### **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 Members may recall that I noted previously the 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 but I am committed to filling these posts and taking the pressure off the existing teams.
- 3.3 A significant planning application for 700 new homes in Lewes (referred to as the **Phoenix Project** and the largest residential application submitted in a British National Park), was submitted to the Authority in early March and is available for public comment. The application will be considered by Planning Committee Members later in the year.
- 3.4 Turning to Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), the submission by National Highways of the Development Consent Order application for the upgrade to **Junction 9 of the M3** has been accepted by the Planning Inspectorate, with the examination due to start in the coming weeks. Officers will prepare a written representation for consideration by Members, which is anticipated to be at June Planning Committee and possibly, dependent upon examination timings, at the July NPA.
- 3.5 **Rampion 2**, the large off shore windfarm near to Rampion 1, are currently proposing to submit their application for a Development Consent Order in the summer and officers will prepare a written representation for consideration by Members once the DCO application has been submitted. Much, but not all, of our time on NSIPs is covered by Planning Performance Agreements where we charge for our officer time.

### **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. New initiatives with Natural England (NE) in the National Park include the Protected Sites Strategy at Kingley Vale focused on the impact of deer on woodland and exploring the feasibility of a Super NNR at Lullington Heath and a Nature Recovery Project focused on the Seaford to Eastbourne Downland block. SDNPA is also now a signatory to the Weald to Waves landowner-led landscape scale initiative which aims to link Ashdown Forest to the sea. We are at the beginning of a 12 month development phase for Downs to the Sea and progress towards a

delivery phase bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund in early 2024, whilst the Changing Chalk NLHF is into year one of delivery.

- 4.2 To date 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. This includes 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.
- 4.3 The **Trees for the Downs** winter planting saw over 16,400 trees planted across the National Park. The **ReNature grant** is funding initiatives at Steyning Downland and Nepcote Green Pond. **Pounds for Ponds** is a new fund sponsored by Froglife which was made available internally in the first instance to support several C4NS and other relevant projects. This has not yet started but has seven projects agreed in principle.
- 4.4 The OEP has launched a Call for Evidence on Protected Sites and SDNPA will be responding, as well as contributing to the National Parks England (NPE) response. For Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) we still await the publication of the Regulations and Guidance. Locally a pan-Sussex approach is being taken which will result in a West Sussex strategy and an East Sussex with Brighton Hove strategy, plus a Hampshire strategy. Responsible Authorities have been provisionally appointed with formal agreements with Defra pending. Nationally a stakeholder group has been established which includes NPE and NAAONB representation.
- 4.5 The government has now published its response to the **Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) consultation**, however like LNRS we still await publication of the full Guidance and Regulations. The recent information has provided further clarity on types of development that will be exempt from the BNG requirement, those not exempt, and the transition period for Small Sites applications will now run to April 2024. The BNG requirement will not apply to irreplaceable habitats.
- 4.6 The **'Green Financing'** or **'Nature Based Solutions'** work is progressing well in partnership with Palladium under the National Parks Partnership Revere Model which, with external funding, now extends to five individual ReNature projects including the creation of a Woodland Carbon Platform. Concurrently to this work, the organisation is now playing a more active role in the monetising of ecosystem services to support landowners and farmers in creating supplementary income streams to their traditional farming income through unlocking private finance. This work seeks to secure strategic nature restoration at scale and also has the potential to generate unrestricted income through both; compliance and voluntary markets, with the NPA acting as a broker. We currently have three landowners entering into strategic partnerships with the NPA; Gawthorpe Estate, Hinton Ampner and Iford Estate as well as ongoing conversations with a number of other interested landowners. Recently we organised a meeting with the local authorities within the SDNP to assess their demand and appetite for developing a local carbon platform in the SDNP that could deliver local solutions for carbon, nature recovery and communities.
- 4.7 We continue to deliver the **FiPL programme** across the National Park, now approaching the end of year two (22/23), and have awarded 25 projects all of the £374,424.98 allocated to us by Defra. In February Defra announced that in addition to year three (23/24) there will also be a year four (25/25). Budgets have yet to be confirmed, but this is good news that will enable us to help more farmers throughout the National Park adapt their businesses to be more resilient and sustainable.
- 4.8 A flurry of announcements were recently made by Defra in January concerning the development of **Environmental Land Management (ELM)**:
  - In 2023, six new standards will be added to the existing three in the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). This will widen the offer to farmers, covering a range of farm types and habitats, facilitating more environmentally sustainable farming practices alongside food production.
  - From January 2023, Countryside Stewardship (CS) management and capital payment rates have been updated. In the majority of cases this has led to increases in the amount

paid, reflecting increased input and material costs, which is hoped will provide more incentive for farmers to join the scheme.

- The concept of Local Nature Recovery within ELM has now been removed and will be replaced with Country Stewardship Plus (CS+). This will evolve from the existing scheme structure, and should mean that a fully functioning scheme that is familiar to farmers can be developed more quickly. It is hoped that CS+ will reward farmers for taking coordinated action, much as the farmer clusters in the SDNP are doing already, but we await further details on this.
- Landscape Recovery, designed for larger scale, long-term bespoke projects, will open again for applications this spring and in 2024. It is expected that up to 25 projects may be accepted.

This was a welcome update, especially for farmers who are trying to see how their businesses will fit into ELM. With further details still to come, we continue to work with farmers and farmer groups across the SDNP to ensure that the final schemes are fit for purpose.

## 5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 At the all staff meeting on 23 May we will be **launching a staff survey**. We are working again with the consultants who implemented the 2018 staff survey so we can use the previous results to provide us with useful benchmarking data. The results will then be fed back to all staff at the September all staff meeting.
- 5.2 Plans are underway for the **South Downs Summit** in February 2024. The Summit will bring together policy makers, thinkers and decisions makers around green finance to debate and look at the future role it could play in delivering nature recovery. As an innovative Protected Landscape, playing a leading role in this area, we will act as convener, providing the “glue” to bring the experts together in one place to debate and agree how the public and private sector can work together to maximise the nature recovery impact of this new market. In addition to progressing our public affairs objectives, it will be an opportunity to showcase how the National Park is working with landowners and businesses to make this happen on the ground and our role as a key facilitator in achieving national government targets. Details will be brought to the October NPA.
- 5.3 Due to the upcoming local elections, the number of **Member events** taking place over the next few months is limited, however, we are able to include the Member Planning Tour in the schedule on 11 May. Members may remember that the Planning Tour was cancelled due to the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, but we look forward to visiting a number of completed developments of various types over the course of the day. This is for all Members, not just the Planning Committee. On 14 April, members of the Policy & Resources Committee will be meeting for their annual away day.
- 5.4 Following the local elections we expect a number of new Members to be appointed to the SDNPA; the actual number will become clearer following 4 May. A comprehensive induction programme is already being planned, with these sessions scheduled for 4 July and 12 September. We look forward to sharing the work of the SDNPA with these new Members and are considering the best ways to involve current Members in these induction days.
- 5.5 In order to ensure that the trading company remains quorate after the local elections I have agreed in consultation with the Chair that Chris Dowling should be appointed to the company with effect from the beginning of April. Once all new Members have been appointed to the Authority following the local elections, further Member appointments to the trading company will be brought to the AGM for approval.
- 5.6 The **Corporate Plan** sets out how the authority will prioritise resources to deliver parts of the Partnership Management Plan and the action plan for 2023-25 was discussed at a Member workshop on the morning of the P&R committee. There have been some changes to the focus of the Corporate Plan, most significant is that it is a two-year plan taking us to the end of the Partnership management Plan in 2025. The three high level targets remain and are supplemented by corporate key indicators. There are fewer measures in the current

draft, down from 75 measures to around 31. The high-level targets are grouped as before around Nature Recovery, Climate Action and A National Park for All, The corporate priorities are grouped around Place Making, Generating Income, Land Management, and the Economy. This is a change from the nine work areas that were in the previous Corporate Plan. Data about all of the work of the Authority, whether by projects or core work will be used to feed into the higher-level targets, to show impact. The reporting is aligned to what we understand Defra will require going forward.

- 5.7 We are currently making further refinements to the draft Corporate Plan as a result of the discussions at the Member workshop. A revised draft will be circulated to Members of the P&R Committee for any further feedback before the final draft is submitted for approval at the NPA meeting in July. Data collection for the new measures will start from April 2023 in anticipation of the plan being approved in July, to ensure that we have data on performance during quarter 1.

## 6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 We've had a strong start to the year for media, particularly around inspiring audiences about biodiversity and the importance of Dark Skies. With a heavy focus on nature, our annual photo competition attracted well over 200 media hits across the UK, including coverage in [The Guardian](#), [The Times](#), [Daily Express](#), [Telegraph](#), Evening Standard, Mail, [BBC Online](#), ITV, [Yorkshire Post](#), BBC South TV news and many more. Our astrophotography competition, stressing the importance of Dark Skies for nature recovery, did similarly well, making it the top of the BBC news feed.

- 6.2 Our digital audiences continue to grow with our monthly e-newsletter now attracting 10,500 subscribers, our website attracts c140,000 unique visitors a month and we have over 72,000 followers on our social channels. Our Seven Sisters Country Park channels continue to grow well, with followers doubling to over 5,000 in the last year.

- 6.3 Our hybrid **Dark Night Skies Festival** is a key part of our public engagement commitment as an International Dark Skies Reserve. There were five in person events spread from Winchester to SSCP, which attracted over 2,100 people. The digital element of the festival including everything from podcasts to videos and reached over 56,000 people.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 14 December 2022 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more details 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 N/A

