

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **11 July 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 30 March 2023 NPA.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 There has been a raft of **recent Government consultations**, to the point where it has been hard for the SDNPA and indeed National Parks England (NPE) to keep up. Our response to most of these has been through our Nature Recovery officer working group, which brings together key Countryside Policy & Management (CPM) and Planning staff.
- 2.2 From the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) there has been a **call for evidence on protected sites for nature**, focused on the effectiveness of the SPA/SAC, SSSI and Local Wildlife Sites networks in contributing to the Government target of 30% of England managed for nature by 2030. We have responded and also fed in to the NPE response. A new **OEP call for evidence on nature recovery** is open and we are considering how to respond to this locally and through NPE.
- 2.3 New guidance on the **Biodiversity Duty** has been published by Defra. We have also responded to a DHLUC consultation on environmental assessment as part of proposals to reform the current system through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. It is proposed that new 'Environmental Outcomes Reports' (EOR) replace the EU-derived Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment processes. Depending on your viewpoint this is either a welcome simplification or a dangerous watering down. Copies of the SDNPA responses to all these consultations are available from Member Services on request.
- 2.4 There has been much welcome national media attention on **water quality** over the past few months and in particular the appalling record of water companies on sewage spills. The National Park is hugely affected by sewage and nitrate pollution to the rivers which cut through the downs, especially the Itchen, Meon, Rother/Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere, and it is shocking to note that none of these meet good ecological standards. As one of the worst offenders in England, Southern Water has been forced to produce a **"Turnaround Plan"** to accelerate the clean-up, but it is unclear whether this goes anywhere near far enough and whether it will make much difference within the National Park since it is focused

on coastal waters. We have still to discover how the dedicated national fund into which water company fines will now be put might be channelled into catchment improvements in National Parks and AONBs.

- 2.5 **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** are the key mechanisms the Government wishes to use to get local partners behind its biodiversity goals. For the 48 LNRS across England, progress is slow and somewhat frustrating as the “responsible authorities” (in our case HCC, WSCC and ESCC/BHCC) have been waiting for clear guidance and dedicated funding from Defra. SDNPA is a “supporting authority” along with Districts and Boroughs and we are already well embedded in the governance being set up for the LNRS, but it is likely to be Autumn before strategy preparation commences in earnest. The public consultations on LNRS are due in Spring 2025. Apart from being well after the General Election, this timeline would then run in parallel with the SD Local Plan Review, and also probably the next review of our Partnership Management Plan.
- 2.6 I continue to meet with Natural England, the National Association of AONBs and the National Trails as part of the NPE collaborative work to help shape the creation of the new **Protected Landscapes Partnership (PLP)**. This is the body originally proposed by the Glover Review and endorsed in the Government’s subsequent consultation. Progress has been frustratingly slow – and Defra are still unable to say when they will be able to publish their response – but the partners are now making some headway by gaining Departmental approval to push on without waiting for the official Defra statement.
- 2.7 This is not an easy task and I have been impressed by the unanimity and strength of purpose of the Protected Landscapes family. A number of workshops have been held about the composition of the future PLP work programme, a Partnership Manger has been appointed and the group is soon to advertise for an EDI champion and a Chair.
- 2.8 Once the independent Chair has been appointed and the new body is in place we will have a powerful advocate for all Protected Landscapes, able to press our case and speak to truth to power, as well as to strengthen the links between the Landscapes and accelerate work on shared services, training, best practice etc. The launch date remains unclear since this will require support from Defra but we are pressing on with the aim of bringing it into existence in the Autumn.
- 3. Planning**
- 3.1 Year-end **planning performance** is subject to a comprehensive report at Policy and Resources Committee on 20 July. I am pleased to report that planning performance in the previous and 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.
- 3.2 Members will be aware that we are the only National Park to administer the **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**. In 2022/23 we raised, at £3.015m, the highest amount since CIL was introduced in 2017. Some of this money has been paid to the parish and town Councils where development has occurred, with the remainder to be allocated by SDNPA for projects across the National Park. The recommendations for CIL spending will be determined by Planning Committee in the Autumn, following an all Member workshop on the topic.
- 3.3 Further projects have been funded via money held from **Section 106 agreements** secured through the planning system, although this is gradually being superseded by CIL receipts. In 2022/23 £862k was disbursed to 19 projects including sports and community facilities in Petersfield, solar panels on affordable housing dwellings in East Meon and improved child play facilities in Lewes.
- 3.4 Turning to **Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)**, the submission by National Highways of the Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the upgrade to **Junction 9 of the M3** has been accepted by the Planning Inspectorate, with the 6 month

examination having started in May. Officers prepared a written representation on this scheme which was considered by Members at the June Planning Committee.

- 3.5 The Secretary of State for Transport has deferred plans for the **A27 at Arundel** into the funding period 2025-2030 so the submission of a DCO application will not happen this year (as previously scheduled). I will update Members when a new timeframe becomes apparent.
- 3.6 RWE, the applicant for Rampion 2 Offshore Windfarm, has recently announced the finalised route for the onshore cable corridor element of the scheme they intend to submit to the Planning Inspectorate later this year. This follows confirmation that the site area proposed for the offshore array has been reduced and now excludes the area to the east of the existing Rampion 1 windfarm. Once the application has been submitted to, and accepted by, the Planning Inspectorate, officers will prepare a written representation on the scheme to be considered by Members.
- 3.7 In terms of the **Local Plan review** officers are currently undertaking the sizeable task of assessing potential development and renewable energy sites from across the National Park.
- 3.8 I am pleased to report that the Thomas Heatherwick designed **Woolbeding Glasshouse and Silk Route Garden** which was granted planning permission by our Planning Committee and has now been built was commended in the 'best project' category at the Royal Town Planning Institute's South East Awards in June.

#### 4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 Members will be aware the SDNPA took direct action to shore up the listed buildings affected by the **fire in Midhurst**. As a result, the two listed buildings are now shored up and the risk to the public has been removed. This enabled the road to be reopened on 23 June, approximately 10 days ahead of schedule. Angel Yard residents can also now access their properties by car for the first time since the fire. The economic and community impact on Midhurst of the road closure has been severe but the action that the SDNPA led stabilised and preserved the facades of these listed buildings and accordingly enabled the road to be reopened.
- 4.2 At the time of writing neither insurer has accepted liability for the fire so, had the SDNPA (in partnership with Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council) not stepped in to take direct action the buildings would not have been shored up and would be deteriorating further, the unsafe chimneys would not have been removed and the road would still be closed. We are taking action to seek to recover the monies we have spent from the owners/their insurers.
- 4.3 The **Our South Downs (OSD)** network turned one year old in May, and now has a membership base of over 200 businesses across the South Downs. The South Downs Protector corporate donation scheme has brought in £20,000 through the first two businesses signing up. The **Green South Downs Sustainability Certification** launched in May and 19 pilot businesses are soon to receive award plaques.
- 4.4 March 2023 saw the end of year 2 of the **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** Programme. During the year, 37 projects were supported totalling £383,822, including a successful bid for an additional £29,832 from the national pot. 66 farmers were engaged in the programme. Projects supported included restoration of chalk grassland habitat, wetland management, hedge planting, pond creation, traditional flint barn restoration, interpretation, items to facilitate regenerative farming and support for farm diversification.
- 4.5 Due to the success of the FiPL programme across all protected landscapes in England, Defra have announced a one year extension to March 2025. We have now been given our budgets for both years 3 (2023/2024) and 4 (2024/2025), which for project delivery are £602,868 and £1,025,749 respectively. This welcome news will enable us to support more farmers over a longer timeframe.
- 4.6 Earlier this year, Defra made further announcements concerning the roll-out of **Environmental Land Management (ELM)**. Headlines include:

- Six further Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) standards will be available in 2023 - hedgerows, integrated pest management, arable & horticultural land, improved grassland and low input grassland.
  - The Local Nature Recovery Scheme will not be developed and Countryside Stewardship (CS) will continue to become the “middle tier” of ELM. By the end of 2024, 30 additional CS management options will be added.
  - CS payment rates have been reviewed to reflect changes in management costs.
  - A new scheme known as ‘CS Plus’ will be developed to facilitate farmers working together at a landscape scale.
  - A second round of the Landscape Recovery Scheme has now opened, with 25 projects expected to be funded in this round. We have made a bid focused on the Arun Valley
- 4.7 The expansion of SFI will provide an opportunity for more farmers to join the scheme, which can run alongside existing CS schemes (so long as management options are not paid for twice). CS Plus could provide further support for farmers working together within farmer clusters in the National Park, but more information is required before we are able to see what this may look like.
- 4.8 The South Downs **Nature Recovery Programme** continues to deliver action for ReNature and Core Nature through a variety of mechanisms. In 2022/23, we registered approximately 368 initiatives on the Nature Recovery Log. This equates to an estimated 5,565 ha land managed or secured for nature, which is 43% of our 2030 target. These initiatives delivered the following in 2022/23:
- Total Estimated habitat creation: 404ha
  - Estimated length of hedgerow: 24.5km
  - Estimated 56,529 trees planted
  - 28 ponds restored or created.
- 4.9 Grants through our **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** scheme have been a significant contributor to this target, delivering some 3,735ha. Moving forward, we expect the FiPL contribution to decrease but anticipate the delivery of Nature Based Solutions funded by offset money to increase and, ultimately, exceed our target.
- 4.10 The **‘Nature-Based Solutions’** work, which is how we describe our **green financing** programme, is progressing at pace. After agreeing five smaller schemes with landowners, the Authority is now playing a more active role in the monetising of ecosystem services to unlock private finance and deliver nature restoration at scale across the South Downs. We currently have five landowners (Gawthorpe Estate, Hinton Ampner, Iford Estate, Warnford Park Estate and West Lea Farm) entering into agreements; and ongoing conversations with two more.
- 4.11 In addition to the above, we are also working with other landowners to secure land-use change, often motivated by the pursuit of emerging new environmental markets, and this is delivering a number of additional windfall nature restoration sites. In these cases the SDNPA is acting as Local Planning Authority/Competent Authority, ensuring the sites are monitored and enforced through legal agreements.
- 4.12 **Whole Estate Plans (WEPs)** continue to be an important tool for SDNPA in working with our major landowners towards landscape scale nature recovery and other objectives, and creating a context in which planning decisions can be taken. There are currently eleven estates with active WEPs, seven of which are endorsed – most recently for the Brighton Downland in February - and four are active at various stages in the process.
- 4.13 We undertake annual reviews with estates which have WEPs and give each a RAG status in terms of what progress has been made and how much the estate has contributed towards outcomes in the National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP). Four of the “early adopters” of WEPs (Wiston Estate, Highfield & Brookham School, Iford Estate and West

Dean Estate) are now planning to undertake 'light touch reviews' to reflect their growing ambitions.

## 5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 At the all staff meeting on 23 May we launched our **staff survey**. We are working again with the consultants who implemented the 2018 staff survey so we can use the previous results to provide useful benchmarking data. The results will be fed back at the September all staff meeting and an action plan will be compiled. In 2018 we had an excellent response rate of 93%, showing high staff engagement. At the time of writing and the survey yet to close, we already have a response rate of 78%.
- 5.2 With a significant number of **new Members** joining the Authority following the local elections, the Governance Team have organised a comprehensive Induction programme to ensure they are well equipped to perform their key roles in decision making and steering the strategic direction of the Authority. The first induction day took place on 4 July which, as well as welcoming them to the Authority, introduced Members to their roles on committees and provided key governance information. The second induction day on 12 September will inform Members on the Authority's main areas of work, in particular those related to our Corporate Plan priorities, and help them to perform their roles as ambassadors and advocates for the National Park. The Member Strategic Day on 28 September will then provide an opportunity for all Members to see the progress at Seven Sisters Country Park and to understand the challenges faced at the site; for new Members this will be an important introduction to another of the Authority's key areas of work.
- 5.3 Since the last NPA I have taken three decisions using my urgent action powers as set out in Standing Order 18. These relate to items covered earlier in this report, namely:
- On 5 May 2023 - The Service of Urgent Works Notices under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, at The Angel Inn, North Street, Midhurst and The Tuck Shop and Cranstones, North Street, Midhurst.
  - On 12 May 2023 - Award of Contract for Urgent Works to conserve Listed Buildings at The Angel Inn, North Street, Midhurst and The Tuck Shop and Cranstones, North Street, Midhurst.
  - On 13 June 2023 - Written response to the Development Consent Order (DCO) for the M3 Junction 9 Improvement Scheme.

## 6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 During the spring and early summer we achieved a lot of coverage around our ReNature work and, in particular, the initiatives to raise money to fund ReNature. Our latest *Beelines* update about creating 66 hectares of wildflower habitat attracted over 200 media hits across the UK, including BBC Radio 2, BBC South East, Evening Standard, Express, Independent and The Sun. The momentum continued with the launch of the dew ponds initiative, *Pounds for Ponds*, which garnered 218 pieces of coverage, including a page in The Times.
- 6.2 Our people-based projects also attracted plenty of media interest with the launch of the accessible Cuckmere Audio Trail aimed at people with visual impairment, and our top tips for connecting with nature for Mental Health Awareness Week.
- 6.3 Our digital audiences continue to grow with over 340,000 unique website visitors between April and June this year. We plan to continue to grow this audience with the creation of our new digital hubs and the Walking Hub and Accessibility hubs are now live. We have gained over 11,000 new social media followers in the last year,
- 6.4 Our monthly newsletter audience has seen an increase of nearly 20% in subscribers over the last year. Our Spring planning newsletter went out to over 1,200 subscribers, as well as the 176 parishes, local authorities inside and on the edge of the National Park and local MPs.
- 6.5 We have also had a busy period on **Seven Sisters** communications with over 105,000 unique visitors visiting the website in the last year and the social media following almost doubling over the same period.

**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 30 March 2023 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