

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

### **POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 23 FEBRUARY 2023**

Held at the Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes at 1pm

Present: Annie Brown, Tim Burr, Melanie Hunt (Chair), Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, Doug Jones, Martin Osborne, Diana van der Klugt, and Stephen Whale.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Morris Findley

Independent Members of the Committee: Tom Fourcade, Catriona Aves.

Other SDNPA Members: Vanessa Rowlands (Chair of the Authority), Ian Phillips (Deputy Chair of the Authority).

SDNPA Officers: Trevor Beattie (Chief Executive), Andrew Lee (Director of Countryside Policy & Management), Mark Alden (Enterprise Development Lead), Nick Heasman (Country and Policy Manager), Anne Rehill (Performance and Projects Manager), Peter Cousin (Commercial Manager), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Louise Read (Monitoring Officer), Nigel Manvell (Chief Finance Officer) Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance) Jane Roberts (Committee Officer), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer).

Also Attended by: Andy Conlan (Grant Thornton, External Auditor).

#### **OPENING REMARKS**

134. The Chair opened the meeting.

135. The Chair welcomed all those present and stated that:

- The meeting was being webcast by the Authority and would be available for subsequent on-line viewing. Anyone entering the meeting was considered to have given consent to be filmed or recorded, and for the possible use of images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purpose.
- SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthers the National Park Purposes and Duty. Members regarded themselves first and foremost as Members of the Authority, and would act in the best interests of the National Park as a whole, rather than as representatives of their appointing body or any interest groups.

136. Within the opening remarks the Chair:

- Welcomed Vanessa Rowlands Chair of the Authority to the Meeting. Thanked Lawrence Leather for his time as a co-opted Member, and who had recently left and was working at Seven Sisters Country Park as a Ranger.

#### **ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

137. Apologies were received from OlaOlu Adedayo and Henry Potter.

#### **ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

138. Stephen Whale declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 12 as he was Director and Chair of South Downs Operations Ltd, so would not take part in the discussion or vote.

139. Martin Osborne declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 8 as a Brighton and Hove City Council Councillor and Chair of the Aquifer Partnership. As he was on the Brighton & Hove Policy and Resources Committee that approved the Brighton & Hove Downland Whole Estate Plan (WEP) last year he would not take part in the debate or vote and would move to the Public Gallery. Also, Agenda Items 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20 as Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) used the same Internal Auditor as well as the financial services and Financial Officer as the SDNPA.

140. Annie Brown declared a personal Interest in Agenda Item 8, as she owned a farm business that tenanted part of the land and she would withdraw from the meeting.

### **ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2022**

141. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 22 September 2022 were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendment:
- Page 5, Minute 86, remove Melanie Hunt as she had no Declaration of interest, and replace with Diana van der Klugt who did have a declaration of interest.

### **ITEM 4: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS**

142. Member's Budget Workshop sessions had taken place and looked at various scenarios for financial planning. It was a productive workshop and the Chair recorded her thanks to everyone who took part.
143. The current limit on financial delegations to officers was £100k, but this limit would be reviewed, as it was set 10 years ago. This would be brought to a future meeting of the Authority.

### **ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS**

144. There were none.

### **ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

145. There were no members of the public who had requested to speak.

### **ITEM 7: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

146. Officers advised that there was no requirement to consider any item in private session.
147. Annie Brown left the meeting at 1.15pm.
148. Martin Osborne moved to the public gallery 1.15pm.

### **ITEM 8: BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY DOWNLAND ESTATE WHOLE ESTATE PLAN**

149. The Enterprise Development Lead and Countryside and Policy Manager introduced report PR22/23-27 and reminded Members of the report contents.
150. The Committee commented that:
- The quality of the Whole Estate Plan (WEP) was praised.
  - Commitment from all areas of the council and department would be needed for the delivery of the WEP.
151. Members were advised:
- Brighton & Hove City Councillor thanked the team at BHCC and Savills for all their hard work on the WEP.
  - BHCC were recruiting a new post to work across the Authority to ensure the WEP would be effective. The post would be advertised shortly.
  - The SDNPA would work across the Downland, particularly with their Countryside and Policy Manager – Eastern, to support the WEP.
152. **RESOLVED:** The Committee endorsed the Brighton & Hove City Downland Estate Whole Estate Plan at Appendix 1.
153. Annie Brown and Martin Osborne returned to the meeting 13.27pm.

### **ITEM 9: DEFRA ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

154. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management gave a verbal update.
155. Members commented:
- Seemed very much a levelling down rather than up approach.
  - Had the Farming and Protected Landscape Funding (FIPL), timeline for applications been extended?
  - Would there be a delay on small sites with Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)?
156. Members were advised:
- Re-distribution of funds did not always work across National Parks.
  - The number of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty could be increased. There was nothing in the proposal that would affect the National Park status.
  - Defra was targeting March 2023 to respond further to the Landscapes Review. June 2023 would be a soft launch of the National Landscapes Partnership. SDNPA – along with all national parks - would probably be asked to do more, with less resource.
  - FIPL had been extended for another 2 years. FIPL would benefit farmers within the South Downs and help to pay for officer time to deliver the initiative. FIPL was praised for being farmer led.
  - BNG on small sites was not mandatory until 2025, however it would be good to go live in 2023 on larger sites. BNG would be implemented on the smaller sites in April 2024.

#### **ITEM 10: CORPORATE PLAN UPDATE**

157. The Performance and Projects Manager introduced report PR22/23-28 and reminded members of the report content and The Chair advised that Members had just attended a workshop on the Corporate Plan which considered the detail of an action plan that would run for 2 years.
158. The Committee commented that:
- Co-opted members should be able to comment on the draft plan before it was taken for approval at a future National Park Authority Meeting (NPA).
159. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the proposed revised format of the Corporate Plan 2020-25 Years 4 & 5 Action Plan, as set out in Section 3 of this report.

#### **ITEM 11: Q3 CORPORATE AND PROJECT PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23**

160. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management introduced the report PR22/23-29 and reminded members of the report content.
161. The Committee commented that:
- It was noted that at Table 103-112, amber elements were there as Officers were waiting for Government advice.
  - The table on page 103, should say 1<sup>st</sup> October to end of December.
  - The language was deemed obscure in the writing of progress on Deer Control.
  - Point 6.4 said that the signage was complete and the project was closed. The signage across some of the South Downs National Park (SDNP) signs were missing letters, would this be rectified?
  - In regards to the appendix on page 103 on the definition of good condition of habitat, to what extent was the Authority working with Natural England on this?

- Pages 97 and 98 detailed two projects that were unsuccessful, would there be feedback as to why they were unsuccessful and any relevant learning? If they were both in the Arun Valley was there any significance?
- Fair Game was a good initiative for the welfare of deer.
- Parish Members could reach out to Parishes to engage in the Parish workshops. The SDNPA could act as a hub so community and Parish groups could reach out to each other.
- It was important Members were aware when Parish meetings were taking place across the SDNP.

162. Members were advised:

- Fair Game was the name of the Deer Control Project. It was at the early stages and was exploratory.
- Issues with SDNP signage and letters falling off was currently being resolved, but due to the materials used to make the signs, letters could not be just stuck back on, and it was a more complex fix.
- There was no significance or connection that both projects that were unsuccessful for funding were in the Arun Valley. One of the projects lost to the Weald to Waves proposal. Resubmissions would be made within the next month. The aim of the projects was to make more resilient flood plains.
- There was a Shared Prosperity Fund available from Arun District Council for an apprentice Ranger, we had met the criteria but had not received feedback as to why we were unsuccessful in obtaining it.
- SDNPA were currently in consultation with Winchester City Council on Carbon funding.

163. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q3 Corporate and Project Performance report 2022/23.

164. Stephen Whale Left the meeting 2.22pm.

## **ITEM 12: Q3 PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23 ON SOUTH DOWNS COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS LIMITED**

165. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management introduced report PR22/23-30 and reminded Members of the report content.

166. The Committee commented that:

- More animals were needed to keep the chalk grassland in the right condition. There was some concern about the removal of the fencing given the high cost of electronic collars. There were Capital Grants for fencing.
- Some data supporting the monitoring of targets seemed difficult to report on. Was there a way to report on it quarterly?

167. Members were advised:

- There had been no fencing since 2021, it was acknowledged that the electronic collars were not a complete replacement for fencing, but the site was now much more accessible. The current fencing that was being taken out was not fit for cattle and would have needed to be replaced. Therefore if the electronic collars proved ineffective nothing had been lost in trying them; but so far it was working well.
- The KPIs would be reviewed for year 2 of SDCOL operation to improve reporting.

168. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q3 Performance report 2022/23 on South Downs Commercial Operations Limited.
169. Stephen Whale returned to the meeting 2.29pm.
170. At the Chair's discretion, the agenda order was changed to take Agenda Item 15 and Agenda Item 16 after Agenda Item 12.

**ITEM 15: BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2022/23: MONTH 9**

171. The Chief Finance Officer introduced report PR22/23-33 and reminded Members of the report content.
172. The Committee commented that:
- Use of underspend to offset the approval fund would go to the National Park Authority Meeting (NPA) for approval.
  - Pleased to know that the capital investment to Seven Sisters Country Park could be used for internal funding.
173. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Noted the 2022/23 Revenue Forecast position as at month 9 of a net (£393,000) below budget variance.
  2. Noted the 2022/23 Capital Forecast position as at month 9 of a zero-budget variance and recommend that the National Park Authority (the "NPA") approve the additional Capital variations as set out in Appendix 2.
  3. Noted the Reserves position as at month 9, as set out at Appendix 3.
  4. Noted the Treasury Management overview and position as at month 9, as set out at Appendix 4.

**ITEM 16: TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023/24**

174. The External Auditor introduced report PR22/23-34 and reminded Members of the report content.
175. The Committee commented that:
- It was good to have sight of the ethical statement.
  - Treasury management training would be appropriate for the committee in the future and would be discussed at the P&R away day in April 2023.
176. **RESOLVED:** The Committee recommend that the National Park Authority ("NPA") approves the Treasury Management Strategy 2023/24 as set out in Appendix I comprising the:
- Treasury Management Policy Statement 2023/24;
  - Borrowing Strategy 2023/24;
  - Prudential and Treasury Indicators 2023/24 to 2025/26;
  - Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement; and
  - Annual Investment Strategy 2023/24 including the benchmark risk factor of 0.05%.

**ITEM 13: GIS CONTRACT PROCUREMENT (14.39)**

177. The Performance and Projects Manager introduced report PR22/23-31 and reminded members of the report content.
178. The Committee commented that:

- Were there likely to be many providers when this goes out to tender?
- Would it be cheaper to contract this out or do the job internally?
- What skill set would people have that we do not have in-house?
- How did the authority access the data and pool with partners?
- Cross border nature recovery strategy (led by local authorities) could provide a mechanism to pool the data.
- It was considered that, due to the complex nature of GIS, it should be outsourced.
- It was noted that, on the impact assessment, Data Protection was listed as ‘no impact’. Would a data officer need to be recruited?

179. Members were advised:

- The provider field was not huge, but there were approximately 6 at the last tender, and officers expect a similar level of interest this time.
- It was more efficient to contract out the GIS, keeping the core staffing level smaller.
- The Authority didn’t have the skills set in-house and it had always been outsourced. The skill set would include mapping, acquisition of data, and represent the work we had geographically on a map basis. Acquisition of data licences would be included in the new contract.
- Outsourcing helped with the overlap of data using knowledge they would have gained elsewhere.
- Data captured was General Data Protection Regulation compliant; postcode data, for example, was separated so it would not be linked to individuals. No additional data protection officer would be recruited.

180. **RESOLVED:** The Committee approved:

1. The commencement of a procurement process leading to the appointment of a contractor to undertake Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Services for the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA),
2. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive to award contracts for the above, following a competitive process as described in this report.

181. The Committee adjourned for a break at 2.55pm

#### **ITEM 14: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER**

182. The Head of Governance introduced report PR22/23-32 and reminded Members of the report content.

183. The Committee commented that:

- Members welcomed the Health and Safety training the Governance Team had arranged for them.

184. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the Corporate Risk Register as at February 2023.

#### **ITEM 17: EXTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT AND SECTOR UPDATE FEBRUARY 2023**

185. The External Auditor introduced report PR22/23-35 and reminded Members of the report content.

186. The Committee commented that:

- It would have been good if the Value for Money (VfM) Audit could have been completed in time for it to be considered at this meeting. Would it have been possible to have delivered the VFM report earlier?
- It was important that the dates for Audit reports to be delivered and discussed were reviewed to ensure this Committee was able to fully consider the reports in a timely manner.
- Clarity was sought on the Audit Deliverables and the dates.
- The Audit plan was due last year in April 2022, but it was not received until later in the year. It was important that reports were received in a timely way to ensure that the Committee could discharge its responsibilities.
- Page 203, Audit Market Developments and the Financial Reporting Council report on Grant Thornton. The required improvements were noted as unacceptable, was that related to a 2019/20 file, or something else?

187. Members were advised:

- The accounts were signed off at the end of November 2022, given the time constraints it was not possible to have the VfM Report to this meeting, however the VfM Report would be delivered by the end of February 2023.
- The 2021/22 deliverables were based on that year and would be provided to the Authority during 2022/23. 2022/23 were based on that year and would be provided to the Authority during 2023/24.
- Discussion would be had on the delivery of reports to the Authority and dates for their consideration by the Committee.
- The 2019/20 files were around the Value for Money Audits and the need to better understand the requirements. The learnings identified in those reports would be fed into future audits.

188. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the update report.

#### **ITEM 18: INTERNAL AUDIT STRATEGY, ANNUAL AUDIT PLAN AND CHARTER**

189. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR22/23-36 and reminded Members of the report content.

190. The Committee commented that:

- How much time would be required to deliver the plan for the year?
- Page 224 identified the activities and achievement of the organisation's strategic objectives. This could be an area for a future audit.

191. Members were advised:

- The management time needed to work on the plan would be approximately 4 days, followed by a further 2 days.

192. **RESOLVED:** The Committee approved the Internal Audit Strategy, Annual Audit Plan and Charter for 2023/24.

#### **ITEM 19: INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

193. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR22/23-37 and reminded Members of the report content.

194. Tom Fourcade left the room 3.22pm.

195. **RESOLVED:** Noted progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2022/23)

196. Tom Fourcade returned to the room 3.27pm.

**ITEM 20: ORBIS INTERNAL AUDIT – INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT**

197. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR22/23-38 and reminded Members of the report content.

198. The Committee commented that:

- Page 249, point 1.6 Further Improvement Opportunities were noted, where would these apply to the Authority?

199. Members were advised:

- Page 249, point 1.6 was related more to Sovereign Authorities. Each decision would be taken with a risk management in mind. Strategic risk review would only be taken on the strategic risks.

200. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the findings from the external review report, including those areas identified where opportunities for further improvement may exist for the future.

**CHAIR**

The meeting closed at 3:30pm