

Report to **Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **20 July 2023**
By **Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead**
Title of Report **South Downs National Park Direction of Travel for Volunteering Decision**

The Committee is recommended to:

I. Endorse the direction of travel on the future of volunteering

I. Introduction

- I.1 Volunteering is essential to supporting the delivery of South Downs National Park (SDNP) purposes. Its benefits vastly outweigh the costs, both in terms of the economic value to the National Park of work undertaken and in the health & wellbeing benefits to individuals (i.e. social return of investment). At present, volunteering generates a return of £10.52 for every £1 invested which equals over £1m net per year in benefits to the landscape. We want to build on this success.
- I.2 The South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) was first established in 1981 in East Sussex, as an independent body of volunteers doing practical conservation work, subsequently expanding to cover all of the South Downs. Once the SDNPA became operational in 2011, the VRS affiliated itself with the Authority. In the early days of the National Park, the majority of volunteer activity, which was overwhelmingly practical conservation work, was through the VRS. Over time, administrative support to manage volunteer tasks working with the VRS has increased and the number of different types of volunteering opportunities, alongside traditional practical tasks, being supported by the Authority has also increased. Volunteers now also have a much more direct relationship with the Authority rather than the VRS.
- I.3 The context in which the SDNPA operates has changed significantly since our establishment in 2011, as it has for all organisations who work with volunteers. Changing lifestyles, later retirement, the need for more flexibility, Covid, the expectations of younger and more diverse types of participant all mean that organisations need to think differently and update their offer to prospective volunteers. The SDNPA now has more focused organisational priorities of Climate Action, National Parks for All and Nature Recovery. In addition, the acquisition of Seven Sisters Country Park, our focus on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and the size and focus of National Park financial settlements all mean that the current volunteering model needs to adapt and evolve if it is to remain fit for purpose.
- I.4 Members are asked to endorse the proposed direction of travel for volunteering to transition to a more flexible and inclusive approach as set out in section 4 of this report.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1 Volunteering is the key delivery mechanism for achieving Outcome 8.1 in the Partnership Management Plan: To increase and diversify volunteering opportunities that support the National Park.
- 2.2 It also hits the sweet spot in the SDNPA Corporate Plan priorities as a way of delivering Climate Action and ReNature benefits whilst supporting our ambitions within a National Park for All.

3. Issues for consideration

- 3.1 The last review of volunteering took place in 2017 and led to a five-year strategic approach being agreed by officers for 2018-2023.
- 3.2 In May 2022 the Authority commissioned independent consultants Heritage Insider to undertake an independent review of the current volunteering model. This process included a desk-based review of strategy, processes and evaluations, consultation with key staff, the VRS Committee Chair and partner organisations who engage SDNPA volunteers. The consultants also conducted an online survey of current volunteers, a WhatsApp VRS focus group and an in-depth consultation with a small sample of Youth Action volunteers.
- 3.3 A small staff and volunteer working group has been established to take forward the recommendations of the volunteer review which will lead to a new model of volunteering that is fit for the future, is sustainable, draws on best practice and is responsive to the changed internal structure of the SDNPA and the national and regional policy contexts.
- 3.4 Part of the evolution of the volunteering model will mean the Authority stepping away from the current administrative support to the VRS to enable the Authority to move to a more flexible and inclusive model for volunteering. The VRS Committee have been closely involved in discussions on the new model and the VRS will be considering their position in relation to the new volunteering model at their AGM in July 2023.
- 3.5 Members are asked to endorse the proposed direction of travel for volunteering as set out in section 4, following which work will continue to be undertaken by the working group to implement the recommendations of the review.

4. Proposed direction of travel

- 4.1 Volunteering is essential to supporting the delivery of the SDNP purposes. However, the context in which the SDNPA operates has changed significantly since volunteering was first established. The SDNPA now has more focused organisational priorities: Climate Action, National Parks for All and Nature Recovery. In addition, the acquisition of Seven Sisters Country Park, our increased focus on ensuring good Equity, Diversity and Inclusion practice and the size and focus of National Park financial settlements mean that the current volunteering model needs to adapt and evolve to be fit for purpose for the future.
- 4.2 Volunteers provide a great practical resource allowing for targeted delivery of tasks and making a huge impact in the delivery of Corporate and Management Plan objectives. Volunteers are also important ambassadors for the SDNP as well as contributing towards the organisational objectives of our partner organisations across the SDNP.
- 4.3 The benefits to individual volunteers are significant and include connecting with others and socialising, greater nature connection and physical and psychological wellbeing.
- 4.4 The SDNPA will provide an inclusive and flexible model of volunteering opportunities to allow people to engage in a broad range of tasks driven by operational need and corporate priorities. Volunteering will be a key mechanism for delivering positive organisational outcomes whilst continuing to provide an important mechanism for supporting the individual volunteer's health and wellbeing.

5. Options & cost implications

- 5.1 The options were to stay the same or evolve our volunteering model. The volunteer review recommended evolving the current model as it was no longer fit for purpose and an action plan has been developed in line with the recommendations.
- 5.2 The implementation of the recommendations from the review will be managed within our current level of resourcing.

6. Next steps

- 6.1 The VRS will consider their position in relation to the new volunteering model at their AGM on Saturday 29 July 2023.
- 6.2 The volunteer review recommendations have been considered and an action plan has been developed in line with these. Should Members endorse the direction of travel, further work will be undertaken by the working group to implement the recommendations from the review.

7. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	No. Managed within current resourcing levels through the working group.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	We are implementing the recommendations of the volunteer review as part of the current resource level available. The benefits of the volunteer programme vastly outweigh the costs. This is true both in terms of the: economic benefit to the SDNPA of undertaking a task and the private benefit to individuals (social return of investment). In total, the SDNPA generates a return of £10.52 for every £1 invested in volunteering and returns over £1m net per year in benefits.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	5.1 A National Park for All 8.1 Increase Volunteering Corporate Plan HLT 1,2,3
Links to other projects or partner organisations	South Downs National Park Volunteer Ranger Service South Downs National Park Volunteer Network
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	Volunteering plays a significant role in the delivery of practical conservation activities across the National Park. Many of these tasks contribute positively to the Authority's climate change objectives including increasing the quality and habitat diversity of wildlife sites, increasing habitat connectivity and providing opportunities for positive social and environmental action. Increasing the participation of volunteers, expanding and diversifying tasks and creating more flexible models will both increase the potential for delivery on the ground and also enable more people to take positive action for climate.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the	No

Implication	Yes*/No
proposal?	
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Yes. Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken as necessary.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Data Protection implications?	Volunteer information would continue to be held on our volunteer database in compliance with the relevant legislation.
Are there any Sustainability implications based on the 5 principles set out in the SDNPA Sustainability Strategy?	Sustainable travel options will be considered as part of the evolution of the model, which will also include a review of the volunteer expenses policy to encourage sustainable travel.

8. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
The evolution of volunteering with the Authority is not accepted by volunteers	Possible	Moderate	<p>Involvement of the VRS Committee throughout the process</p> <p>Volunteers input sought during the review process and volunteers informed of progress</p> <p>Volunteer representation on the working group</p> <p>Creation of a Volunteer Panel to ensure volunteer voice during the evolution to the new volunteering model</p>
Not implementing recommendations in the external consultant's report means the volunteering programme is unsustainable with current resource levels	Likely	Moderate	Adoption of the external consultant's recommendations and the implementation of the actions associated with it

AMANDA ELMES

Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead

South Downs National Park Authority

Contact Officer:	Amanda Elmes, Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead
Tel:	07872 410452
Email:	amanda.elmes@southdowns.gov.uk
Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None

