

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 20 JULY 2023

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 10.30am

Present: Annie Brown, Tim Burr, Peter Diplock, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Steven Ridgeon, and Jerry Pett.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Morris Findley and OlaOlu Adedayo.

Independent Members of the Committee: Tom Fourcade.

Other SDNPA Members: Vanessa Rowlands (Chair of the Authority), Heather Baker (Chair of SDNPA Planning Committee)

SDNPA Officers: Andrew Lee (Director of Countryside Policy & Management), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Mike Hughes (Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager), Victoria Crespi (Grants Officer), James Winkworth (Head of Marketing and Income Generation), Ruth James (Communications and Engagement Manager), Vicky Patterson (HR Manager), Bruno Aveiro (Health and Safety Officer), Nigel Manvell (Chief Finance Officer), Lynne Govus (Head of Finance and Corporate Services), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance) Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor), Louise Read (Monitoring Officer), and Jane Roberts (Committee Officer).

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

OPENING REMARKS

1. The Chair opened the meeting.
2. 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.
3. Within the opening remarks the Chair:
 - Welcomed Vanessa Rowlands Chair of the Authority, Tim Burr as new Deputy Chair of the Authority, Heather Baker Chair of the Planning Committee and Jerry Pett, Mark Fairweather, Joan Grech, Theresa Fowler, and Steven Ridgeon as new Members attending their first committee.

ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

4. Apologies were received from Catriona Aves and Maggie Jones.

ITEM 2: ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR

5. No nominations for Deputy Chair had been received, this item would be considered again at the next Policy & Resources Committee meeting on 21 September 2023.

ITEM 3: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

6. There were no declarations of interest.

ITEM 4: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 23 FEBRUARY 2023

7. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 23 February 2023 were approved as a correct record.

ITEM 5: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS

8. February 2023 P&R Committee Agenda Item 9, Defra Environmental Improvement Plan. There was a debate on amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) concerning the section 62 duty of other bodies to have regard to national parks and the general power of competence, it was understood that Defra intended to legislate separately on both those issues so it may be that no amendments were required to the Bill. The Protected Landscapes Partnership would bring together National Parks (NP), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), National Trails and Natural England and would have an independent Chair. Specific funding from Defra was obtained to move this forward. There would be a small national secretariat to support the Partnership.

ITEM 6: URGENT MATTERS

9. There were none.

ITEM 7: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

10. There were none.

ITEM 8: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

11. Officers advised that there was no requirement to consider any item in private session.

ITEM 9: SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK DIRECTION OF TRAVEL FOR VOLUNTEERING

12. The Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead introduced report PR23/24-01 and reminded Members of the report contents.
13. The Committee commented:
 - Pages 33,34 stated there were two further pieces of work in hand. How would we consider the output of those processes to endorse the direction of volunteering in the park?
 - Groups established with the Volunteer Ranger Service worked well, it was important to engage with new groups, for example with youth work and posting on Eventbrite and to find new groups that would support volunteers for the future.
 - Could see the human value of volunteering. What was the practical level of volunteering and how would it deliver for the South Downs National Park (SDNP) priorities? What would volunteering look like in the future?
 - Historically there had been limited outreach, now there were different ways to connect with different people, using different media and Members would endorse this new approach.
 - More details should be provided of accessibility and affordability in the future; however, this proposal was going in a good direction.
 - The Committee would like to see a practical plan with targets, so the success of implementation could be measured. Risks might have changed; different levels of risk should be added, and detail given on how these would be mitigated.
 - The paper contained aspects of the future model; the Committee would like to review the proposal once it had been fully developed.

14. Members were advised:
- Current volunteers had been involved in the review process, there was also volunteer representation on the working group. The Volunteer Ranger Service was due to meet shortly, they would be asked to endorse the direction of travel, with a more detailed action plan.
 - Paragraph 1.3 showed key drivers that had influenced developments, this would need to be ramped up, as there was an appetite for change. Successful youth action work and youth ambassador models would inform future work. Additionally, there had been trials of micro volunteering along with family volunteering, heading towards an inclusive approach.
 - There was information in the summary of the volunteer review document which showed what had been measured and that there was a network with other organisations across the other National Parks with an estimated 91,000 days of activity.
15. **RESOLVED:** The Committee endorsed the direction of travel on the future of volunteering.

ITEM 10: ANNUAL REVIEW OF PLANNING PERFORMANCE: FINANCIAL YEAR 2022/23

16. The Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager introduced report PR23/24-02 and reminded members of the report content. The Chair of Planning Committee commended the work undertaken by the Authority's planning service in the year, despite significant challenges with vacant posts.
17. The Committee commented:
- Performance against the KPI's looked generally impressive. The delivery of the Local Plan (LP) was working well with the inclusion of Local Authorities. There was a perception that the teeth of the plan along with its protections, were not being used by the host authorities. There did not seem to be the same level of training of Officers within the host authorities.
 - Due to new Members starting at the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) there should be training on the LP to enable them to enact the plan for which they were responsible.
 - Members had revisited a development in Liss and met a resident who was concerned about the quality of the houses built. Did the SDNPA have any responsibility here?
 - There had previously been a sense of frustration with Lewes' planning department on their speed of decision making but Members were pleased to see the recent significant improvements.
 - Could the SDNPA presentation on the LP be given to the host authorities to assist in new Member training?
 - Was 10% normal for affordable housing as a proportion of the homes that are built?
 - Could the larger developments include more than 25% affordable housing?
 - Was there a social rent requirement, the most affordable type of affordable housing.?
 - How are complaints being addressed?
 - The currently vacant posts and level of staffing was a challenge for performance. Noted that one team is only at 75% of capacity. How could we retain the staff we had?
 - The Chair thanked Officers for their work on the Angel Hotel, Midhurst following the recent fire.

18. Members were advised:

- There had been training for Members on the roll out of the LP. Last year it was agreed to review the LP and with the review there would be more training.
- Officers within the Host Authorities were expected to conduct training on the LP with their New Members.
- The use of extensions of time was used countrywide, and the SDNPA did arguably overuse them. However, once recruitment had been completed and people were in post, the Planning team would have the resources to review this.
- There were strict guidelines on materials, however, the build quality was ultimately the responsibility of the developer.
- The LP presentation would be shared with the Host Authorities, to assist in the training of new Members.
- Lewes had introduced low-cost housing as a percentage of the tenant's income within its Neighbourhood Plan.
- The percentage of affordable homes built was higher than in previous years.
- Complaints from East Hants had been reduced recently and would continue to be monitored.
- Recruitment of planning officers had taken place and SDNPA had used temporary contractors to fill vacancies. Recruiting senior planning officers was difficult due to short supply, but more Principal Planning Officers had been successfully recruited.
- The welfare and health of the staff was very important. Two new Principal Planners contracts would be signed. DM case work had been shared across the planning department to help reduce pressure on the DM team.

19. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Received and noted the Annual Review of Planning Performance.
2. Considered whether it wished to make any recommendations to Officers relating to performance arising from the report. It did not make any recommendations.

ITEM 11: Q4 PROJECT PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022

20. The Director of Countryside Policy and Management introduced report PR23/24-03 and reminded members of the report content.

21. The Committee commented:

- Page 68/69, would like an explanation of the RAG status, for example Centurion Way, showing green status with only 19% having been completed.
- Outcomes should be made clearer.
- How was capacity measured for taking on new projects? What was the process?
- P112, National Park for all numbers were looking good. The targets were quite low; 6% target. Only 1.5% for black and minority ethnic users, this target should be higher.
- There should be the creation of additional woodland cover, quite a lot of woodland cover is being lost due to ash die back, and the clearing of unhealthy trees.
- P66, carbon emissions, the South Downs Centre in Midhurst had a reduction 4.73% greenhouse gases. The Authority as a whole, not so good.
- Page 70, with the Green South Downs Sustainability Certification Scheme now open,

could members of the scheme's production of CO2 be captured or would they have to measure their own?

- There was a huge amount of information, With the delivery and impact of the activity of the National Landscape Partnership, would this make reporting easier?
- Focused, slimmed down monitoring information should be delivered going forward.
- P66, carbon dioxide figures. Wealden District Council were imposing higher building standards, so the houses built showed lower carbon dioxide emissions.
- Annual monitoring progress reports brought a lot of information which detailed the operation of the organisation.

22. Members were advised:

- The project, RAG status was assessed by monitoring the level of expenditure against the budget available and project deliverables for the point in time of the project. As the SDNPA has slimmed down corporate plan and high-level targets, in future years project performance would be assessed by monitoring contribution towards the high-level targets. The annual review provided some detail of successful projects, and the underlying spreadsheets made available to members provided details of every project..
- Outcome reporting was a difficult task when partners are included. Page 64, SDNPA lead partners in nature recovery shows specific data.
- The process to look at prospective projects looked at contributions to high-level targets and there was a robust system to check the resource was available to deliver, so as not to over commit the resources available. The strategic fund was sometimes used to support delivery.
- Work was underway to establish effective measures of progress on National Park for All.
- Woodlands targets assessed the condition of existing habitat, 20 percent of the Park was woodland. The 1987 storms opened up huge regeneration of woodland sites. Felling licences had been issued for dealing with the ash die back and restocking was being carried out.
- Regarding carbon emissions targets, the SDNPA Estate had been extended with the purchase of Seven Sisters, so the baseline would be looked at again, aiming to reduce emissions at Seven Sisters Country Park.
- The businesses that were signing up to the Green South Downs Sustainability Certification Scheme could be measured within the scheme, the Landscape and Biodiversity Lead (Chalk) would be reviewing.
- The Protected Landscapes Partnership could make reporting easier, and Defra would have KPI's for National Parks (NP) with definitions of higher level reporting required. Natural England were due to provide guidance for management plans for NPs and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Clearer guidance and commitment from government would make data sets available to carry out reporting.
- In the context of our Planning role, carbon reduction was targeted with onsite renewable energy and improved build quality to reduce carbon in the first place. This suite of policies would be looked at within the review of the Local Plan.

23. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q4 Corporate and Project Performance Report 2022/23.

ITEM 12: ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FUND (SCF)

24. The Grants Officer and introduced report PR2/24-04 and reminded Members of the report content.
25. The Committee commented:
 - How did people apply for the SCF?
 - How would we ensure that funding is committed, how is it paid?
 - There was expected to be a change in Hampshire County Council Highways Policy in November to provide villages with more freedom to reduce speeds along their roads providing they could secure funding. The SCF could be a useful route to obtain funding.
26. Members were advised:
 - People could apply for the SCF via rangers or via SDNPA website. Would encourage Members to promote the fund and welcome applications.
 - The project would be delivered then receipts would be submitted and the SCF would pay for the funding, post project completion. Would like to have up front funding in the future.
 - There was already a pilot project in East Sussex looking into the use of CIL funding go above what the Highways Authority would deliver.
27. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the year-end position of the Sustainable Communities Fund.

ITEM 13: YEAR END REPORT ON THE COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT WORK PROGRAMME

28. The Communications and Engagement Manager introduced report PR23/24-05 and reminded members of the report content.
29. The Committee commented:
 - How did the Communications and Engagement Team work with the changing chalk project?
 - The Language used could be difficult to understand, could there be some navigation?
 - Thanked the team for their hard work with communicating what the Authority did. With social media, how was engagement measured? Was there awareness with brand advocates, was there anything Members could do as they were advocates of the SDNPA?
 - Pop up events were excellent including National Park for all and the Seven Sisters. How would we measure the engagement?
 - The messages and audiences were national, was there anything we could do to share the load with other National Parks?
 - What was happening within Members' Local Authorities needed to be shared more widely and vice versa within the SDNPA. Members needed to get local businesses engaged in the Green South Downs and Our South Downs.
30. Members were advised:
 - There was a Changing Chalk steering group which the SDNPA sat on. The Communications and Engagement Team supported the project to ensure it was delivered upon.

- Glossary of terms could be published on the intranet, to make them easier to understand.
- How engagement was measured, was very difficult. The ReNature festival this year identified a list of community groups to target the communications and engagement work. Brand advocates shared updates each week.
- Members were encouraged to go to pop ups and volunteer and become brand advocate of the SDNPA.
- There were several things that happened nationally, National Parks UK, general engagement, National Parks England, Policy work through Defra and National Parks Partnerships.

31. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered progress on the communications and engagement work programme.

32. The Committee adjourned for lunch at 13.02.

ITEM 14: ANNUAL HUMAN RESOURCES AND HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT FOR YEAR 2022/23

33. The HR Manager introduced report PR23/24-06 and reminded Members of the report content.

34. The Committee commented:

- Page 157, the table showed the numbers of employees and numbers of volunteers. Did volunteers have a higher propensity to have an accident?
- Page 163, in the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) demographics the religion percentages did not add up. The ethnicity data showed 167, with not many responses on ethnicity.
- Page 160, the totals 2022/23 looked like they were the highest ever, high incidents with depression related absences, however the trend was decreasing, the increase was probably due to the Covid years.
- When would Members be having their EDI training?
- The Chair thanked the Team for all their hard work.

35. Members were advised:

- There were more volunteers engaged in outdoor activity, however there were lots of safety measures in place so there was no higher propensity for them to have an accident.
- There was an element of trust in people to record their EDI information. There was an EDI steering group to try and improve recording and monitoring.
- Sickness absence with depression showed fewer individuals with longer periods of time absent. Page 159 did show average days of long-term absence.
- There would be two EDI training modules being introduced, one for Chairs and Deputy Chairs and Managers within the Authority, the other for Members and Officers. The module for all Members and Officers would be presented at the next All Staff event in September 2023.

36. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted the update on the Authority's key work areas in HR during 2022-23
2. Agreed that it was satisfied that the Authority's Health and Safety activity over the last 12 months complied with its Health and Safety policy.

ITEM 15: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

37. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-07 and reminded Members of the report content.
38. The Committee commented that:
- Risk 26, Seven Sisters, it was the responsibility of the trading company to implement risk measures, was having no fencing an acceptable risk?
 - Risk 22, income generation, diversification of income and spreading the financial risk of the authority should be included as potential mitigation.
 - Risk 29, the Chair thanked the authority for the leadership it had shown in delivering a solution to open North Street, Midhurst.
39. Members were advised:
- Some fencing did remain where it met open downland. The trading company was aware of it as a risk.
40. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Corporate Risk Register as of July 2023

ITEM 16: ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT AND UPDATED LOCAL CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

41. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-08 and reminded Members of the report content.
42. The Committee commented that:
- The Authority was in a better position to measure and catalogue its outcomes that contribute to economic, social and environmental benefits for the SDNP.
 - It was recognised that the principle of transparency was well embedded at this Authority and Members were encouraged to not be too shy about publicly debating matters on the agenda. However, it remained important that the Authority was alert to this principle when considering matters outside of the formal committee structure. The commitment to transparency was also recognised by the Authority's move to holding one of the meetings of this committee outside of Midhurst on an annual basis.
 - Page 195, Appendix 1, there were currently only two Co-opted Members, the report showed three.
43. Members were advised:
- Page 195, Appendix 1 data was based looking back over last year, there were 3 Co-opted Members within the report timeline.
44. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Approved the Annual Governance Statement for 2022-23 (Appendix 1) to accompany the Authority's Statement of Accounts; and
 2. Noted the updated Local Code of Corporate Governance (Appendix 2).

ITEM 19: INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION

45. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR23/24-11 and reminded Members of the report content.
46. The Committee commented that:
- Managing land, people and animals had a huge risk, and it was good to have the audit to keep those risks on the radar.

47. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2022/23).

ITEM 20: INTERNAL AUDIT – ANNUAL REPORT AND OPINION

48. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR23/24-12 and reminded Members of the report content.
49. The Committee commented that:
- Page 326 talked about an EU Grant; would this be in the plan for next year?
 - Page 314, paragraph 4.8 would this be updated on the SDNPA website.
 - Page 320, There were challenges around insurance mapping, this could be improved upon to avoid areas of duplication.
50. Members were advised:
- There was no plan for the EU Grant, would be on an ad hoc basis.
 - Page 314, paragraph 4.8 was a verbal recommendation, however, would review with Brighton & Hove County Council.
51. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Noted the content of the Annual Audit Report (2022/23) and the Audit Opinion (2022/23); and
 2. Took into account the content of the Annual Audit Report and concluded that it was satisfied with the effectiveness of Internal Audit during 2022/23.

ITEM 17: EXTERNAL AUDIT PLAN & INFORMING THE RISK ASSESSMENT 2022/23

52. The External Auditor introduced report PR23/24-09 and reminded Members of the report content.
53. The Committee commented that:
- It was critical reports were signed off in a timely manner, there was comment in the papers that said they had not been signed off in a timely manner and of poor quality.
 - With the reviews of audit arrangements, we were being looked at as the same as larger local authorities, including land, buildings and pension funds which were not of maximum significance to the SDNPA. There was a need for a National Park external audit model, which would streamline things for auditors and the authority.
 - On page 241, could dates be agreed for submission of the auditor's reports?
 - What reassurance would we have or indemnity for any slippage, would that absolve us of our statutory duties in missing the deadlines? Could the deadline be moved to November as it had been moved previously?
 - Did the SDNPA need to have the pension fund audited as West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) pension funds had already been audited?
 - With the findings and the draft annual report would February be realistic for the Budget report and June Final annual report for submission.
54. Members were advised:
- The sign off was done on time with excellent papers, the comment in the paper regarding sign off and quality was a sector wide statement, not directed at the SDNPA.
 - The External Auditor had not seen any penalties issued for missed deadlines. The 30 September deadline was not met by many Authorities.

- Delayed opinion notice would need to go on the website next to draft statements.
- Land evaluations and pension fund liability was unavoidable and would need the same Audit model as a Local Authority would use.
- The deadline could not be formally moved this year to November, the statutory deadline would be September.
- Pension fund audit was a specific procedure in the authority audit and was required even though WSCC had previously had its pension funds audited.
- February was a realistic date for the Budget report and June was a realistic date for the Final Annual report to be submitted.

55. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Agreed the External Audit Plan
2. Received and considered informing the Risk Assessment

56. Theresa Fowler left the meeting at 2.20pm

57. Annie Brown left the meeting at 2.27pm

58. Peter Diplock left the meeting at 2.29pm

ITEM 18: VALUE FOR MONEY – AUDITOR’S ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

59. The External Auditor introduced report PR23/24-10 and reminded Members of the report content.

60. The Committee commented that:

- Page 292, showed borrowing, was this external?
- For next year, could the report be delivered earlier so it was available for the governance review?

61. Members were advised:

- The borrowing was internal, not external.
- There would be discussions with the Lead Auditor on delivering the report earlier in 2024.
- External Audit would audit the trading company following an internal audit first, to guide it moving forward as a teckal company.

62. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Value for Money – Auditor’s Annual Report 2021/22.

63. The meeting **closed** at 2.44pm

CHAIR