

## **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).

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 Paterson (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 HAIR**

5. No nominations for Deputy Chair had been given, 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 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 is a debate on amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill concerning the section 62 duty of other bodies to have regard to national parks and the general power of confidence, it is understood that Defra intends to legislate on both those issues so it may be that no amendments are required to the Bill. Protected Landscapes Partnership would bring together National Parks (NP), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 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 that:
- Page 33,34 stated there were two further works 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 the volunteers for the future.
  - Could see the human value of volunteering. What was the practical level of volunteering and how would it deliver to the South Downs National Park (SDNP)? How would volunteering look like in the future?
  - Historically there was no outreach, now there were different ways to connect for different people, by different mediums and would endorse this new approach.
  - Accessibility and affordability in the future should be expanded to give more detail, however it was going in a good direction.
  - Would like to see a practical plan with targets so the implementations success would be measured. Risks might have changed, different levels of risk should be added detail given on how this would be litigated.
  - Showed aspects of future models, would like to review 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 group were 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 taken place, this would need to be ramped up, as there was an appetite for change. There were pilot youth action work and youth

ambassador models. There were trials of micro volunteering along with family volunteering, heading towards an inclusive approach.

- There was a level of information in the summary of the volunteer review document that showed what had been measured, 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 that:

- Performance against the KPIs 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 protection, 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 they were responsible for.
- Members had revisited a development in Liss and met a resident who was concerned of the quality of the house build. Does 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 significant improvement in their speed of decision making.
- Could the SDNPA presentation on the LP be given to the host authorities to assist in new Member LP training?
- Was 10% normal for affordable housing in 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?
- Reference vacant posts the level of staffing was a challenge for performance. Noted that one team is only at 75% of capacity. How do you retain the staff you have?

The Chair thanked Officers for their work on the Angel Hotel, Midhurst following the recent fire.

18. Members were advised:

- There had been training with Members on the role out of the LP. Last year it was agreed to review the LP, with the review there would be more training. The development of policies was a good time to do this.
- 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, the SDNPA did arguably overuse them but once recruitment had been completed and people were in post, it would be

looked at.

- There were strict guidelines on materials, however with the build quality this 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 to 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.

**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 that:
  - Page 68/69 would like an explanation of the rag status, for example Centurion Way, sowing green status with only 19% having been completed.
  - Outcomes should be made clearer.
  - How was capacity measured for the projects to take on? What was the process?
  - P112, National Park for all numbers were looking good. The targets were quite low, 6% target 1.5% was black and minority, the 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 dye back, clearing healthy with 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, the Green Stability Scheme, could we capture their production of CO2? Do 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 direct information should be delivered going forward.
  - P66, carbon dioxide figures. Wealden District Council were imposing higher building standards, so the houses were built show lower carbon dioxide figures.
  - Annual monitoring progress reports bought a lot of information which detailed the

operation of the organisation.

22. Members were advised:

- The proportion of the project, rag status was done by understanding the level of output to the budget available, project deliverables for the point in time of the project. Currently there was hybrid reporting, changing the corporate plan and high-level targets, in future years the impacts would be clearer towards the high-level targets, not an impact statement. The annual review did give the detail of the review of projects.
- 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 looks at deliverable high-level targets and was a robust system to check the resource was available to deliver, so not to over commit the resources available. Strategic fund was sometimes used.
- National Park for All was setting targets on how best to measure this, with the direct delivery, so Members are aware the activity to the target audiences. Outreach work to different types of audiences was completed. Biodiversity numbering had been looked at focusing on national park for all, for the corporate plan.
- Woodlands targets condition of existing habitat, 20 percent of the park is woodland, 1987 storms opened up huge regeneration of sites. Felling licences had issued for dealing with the ash die back and restocking was being carried out.
- With the carbon Emission the SDNPA Estate had been extended with the purchase of Seven Sisters, so the baseline would be looked at again, driving it down from Seven Sisters site.
- The businesses that were signing up to the Green South Downs could be measured within the green stability scheme, the Landscape and Biodiversity Lead (Chalk) will be reviewing.
- Protective Landscape Partnerships would make reporting easier, and DEFRA would have KPIs for National Parks (NP) with higher level reporting. Natural England gave guidance for management plans for NP and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Clearer guidance and commitment from government would make data sets available to carry out reporting.
- Carbon reduction was targeted with onsite renewable energy and improved build quality to reduce carbon in the first place. First suite of policies to be looked at within the review of the LP.

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 that:

- How did people apply for the SCF?
- How would we ensure that funding is committed, how is it paid?
- Western Parishes had met with Hampshire County Council, there would be a change in November to the highways policy, 30-40mph limits Hampshire would have their blockers removed and those villages would need to pay for their own speed blockers via their local Parish.

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 to remove road blockers, the use of CIL funding would be used to go above what East Sussex highways had delivered.
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 that:
- 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 on their hard work with communicating what the authority does. With social media, how was engagement measured? Was there awareness with brand advocates, was there anything Members could do as they are 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 rippled out and vice versa within the SDNPA. Members needed to get local businesses engaged in the Green South Downs and Our South Downs pages on the SDNPA website.
  - The Committee adjourned for lunch at 13.02.
30. Members were advised:
- There was a Changing Chalk steering group which the SDNPA sat on. 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 advocates of the SDNPA.
  - There were several things that happened nationally, National Parks UK, general engagement, National Parks England, Policy and Defra, National Parks Partnerships, National funding income generation body.

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

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

32. The HR Manager introduced report PR23/24-06 and reminded Members of the report content.
33. The Committee commented that:
- Page 157, the table showed the numbers of employees and numbers of volunteers, were volunteers with a higher propensity to have an accident?
  - Page 163, 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.
34. 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 on the EDI, there was an EDI steering group to try and overcome that.
  - 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.
35. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
1. Noted the update on the Authority's key work areas in HR during 2022-23
  2. Agreed that it is satisfied that the Authority's Health and Safety activity over the last 12 months complies with its Health and Safety policy.

#### **ITEM 15: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER**

36. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-07 and reminded Members of the report content.
37. 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, with income generation, diversification of income spreading financial risk of the authority and green finance initiative as it would emerge, could have the potential for litigation.
  - Risk 29, the Chair thanked the authority for delivering a solution to open North Street, Midhurst.

38. Members were advised:
- Paragraph 3.2 of the report, Risk 29 showed urgent works undertaken on the Angel Hotel.
  - Some fencing did remain where it met open down land. The trading company was aware of it as a risk.
39. **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**

40. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-08 and reminded Members of the report content.
41. The Committee commented that:
- Paragraph 3.1 with the principles set out could take credit to continue to pursue.
  - Ensuring openness, there were open governance regulations, and this should be open to debate.
  - Pg195, Appendix I, there were currently only two Co-opted Members, the report showed three.
42. Members were advised:
- Page 195, Appendix I data was based looking back over last year, there were 3 Co-opted Members within the report timeline.
43. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:
- (1) Approved the Annual Governance Statement for 2022-23 (Appendix 1) to accompany the Authority's Statement of Accounts; and
44. (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.

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

#### **ITEM 20: INTERNAL AUDIT – ANNUAL REPORT AND OPINION**

47. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR23/24-12 and reminded Members of the report content.
48. 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.
49. 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.

50. **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, to conclude that the Committee is satisfied with the effectiveness of Internal Audit during 2022/23.

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

51. The External Auditor introduced report PR23/24-09 and reminded Members of the report content.

52. 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 (WSCC) 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.

53. 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.

54. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Agreed the External Audit Plan

2. Received and considered informing the Risk Assessment

55. Theresa Fowler left the meeting at 2.20pm

56. Annie Brown left the meeting at 2.27pm

57. Peter Diplock left the meeting at 2.29pm

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

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

59. 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?

60. Members were advised:

- The borrowing was internal, not external.
- There would be discussions with the Head Auditor on delivering the report earlier in 2024.
- The external audit said they would like to come in and externally audit the trading company, there would be an internal audit first, to guide going forward as a teckal company.

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

#### **CHAIR**

The meeting closed at 2.44pm