

Agenda Item 8
Report NPA23/24 - 11

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **19 October 2023**
By **Chief Executive Officer**
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**

Note

Recommendation: **The Authority is recommended to note the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report**

1. Summary and Background

1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since my report to the 11 July NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 The last few weeks have seen a number of important Government announcements on the environment. First, the tabling of the Nutrient Neutrality amendment, and its subsequent defeat in the House of Lords by peers from across the political spectrum. Then a speech by the Prime Minister who spoke of a new politics based around bringing the public on board and not ducking hard choices. He restated the Government's commitment to the (legally binding) UK carbon reduction targets, but said the costs of the current pathway to net zero were too high for many households. Instead, he emphasised the voluntary approach, and extended deadlines for the phase out of petrol and diesel vehicles and gas boilers to 2035 or beyond.

2.2 Meanwhile, the Third Reading of the Levelling Up & Regeneration (LURB) Bill took place in the House of Lords, where a new Government amendment on National Parks was approved. This strengthens the s.62 Duty on public bodies by changing it from "have regard to" National Park purposes and Management Plans to "seek to further" them. This is something we have sought ever since it was first proposed in the Glover Review and then supported in the subsequent Government consultation. We are already making plans to make good use of the new powers as soon as the legislation comes into force. There was, however, nothing on another change we have sought for a long time, a general power of competence to support and extend our efforts to attract private finance.

2.3 At the time of writing, we are awaiting a series of other announcements from Defra to cover the creation of the new Protected Landscapes Partnership (PLP), the full response to the Glover consultation, the new Outcomes Framework and the Management Plan guidance which is being drafted by Natural England (NE) for National Parks and AONBs.

2.4 The latest State of Nature Report which was published at the end of September showed that more species have seen their populations decrease than increase and that 16% of species are threatened with national extinction. We know that concerted and informed action can reverse these trends, which is why the South Downs is bucking the national trend. On the day of the announcement our nature recovery work was picked up by the Radio 4 Today Programme and BBC Breakfast, which helped to balance the negative national news with a message about the need for positive action. SDNPA's work on nature recovery is described in our response to the Report, which is attached for Members to use in their future contacts with stakeholders.

3. Planning

3.1 **Planning performance** continues to be good, with all government targets being met.

3.2 Government is currently consulting on changes to the **plan-making system**. Given the implications for our South Downs Local Plan Review our draft response will be considered by Planning Committee on 12 October. Changes to the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** are expected by the end of the year to inform the new system. This will include how local planning authorities will need to align their plans following the abolition of the 'duty to cooperate'. National Development Management Policies are also expected to be consulted on next year and it will be important to ensure that the new system allows us to continue with National Park specific policies, such as dark night skies and tranquillity.

3.3 The Government have announced that they will **increase planning application fees** from April 2024 by 35% for major applications (10 homes or more) and by 25% for other applications. These fees have not increased for a number of years so this is welcome, as is the Government's stated intention to uprate the fees annually each April in line with inflation.

3.4 The expected introduction of statutory **biodiversity net gain (BNG)** from development has been delayed by Government until next year. Our Local Plan requires the identification and incorporation of opportunities for BNG and we have had success in achieving this already, particularly on larger sites. However, requiring BNG by statute would undoubtedly help us and other Local Planning Authorities progress our work.

3.5 The Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the upgrade to **Junction 9 of the M3** is currently in its 6 month examination period (June to November) and SDNPA officers have been appearing at examination hearings conducted by the Planning Inspectorate. The written representation considered by our Planning Committee in June 2023 forms the basis for officers' input into the examination.

3.6 There has been a wide-ranging Government **consultation on increasing permitted development rights (PD Rights)**, including extending certain rights into National Parks for the first time, particularly in relation to barns and other rural buildings to be used for housing. It also included a call for evidence from DEFRA on supporting nature-based solutions and farming. Some of the proposals to extend permitted development rights into National Parks are concerning, for example the proposed PD Right for barn conversions to residential. This is proposing to allow unrestricted conversion of agricultural barns for up to ten houses in National Parks without requiring planning permission. Whilst these would be subject to certain Prior Approval requirements, this process is limited and by Government taking such development outside the planning permission route we would lose the ability to manage bad design and adverse effects, reduce the chance to improve on matters such as landscape context, dark night skies and sustainability, plus lose the opportunity to secure BNG or CIL. In addition, the new homes created are unlikely to meaningfully deliver local or affordable homes due to the significant premium on such homes in the National Park.

3.7 Other parts of the consultation included some interesting proposals, for example, for increased PD Rights for high street uses, rural buildings to leisure uses, and nature friendly projects, and we recognise some benefits in streamlining the process in relation to these

developments. The deadline for response was 25 September. Due to the tight timescales it was not possible for the response to go to the NPA, so on 20 September, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, I approved the response in line with the urgent action provision in order 18 of the Authority's Standing Orders. Copies of the response sent can be obtained from Member Services. We are also part of a joint NPE response.

- 3.8 The recommendations for **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)** spending will be determined by Planning Committee in December, following an all Member workshop on the topic on 2 November.
- 3.9 Turning to **Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)**, the Rampion 2 Offshore Wind Farm application has recently been submitted and accepted as a valid application by the Planning Inspectorate. The 6 month examination period will start late this year, or early next year. The onshore, underground cabling would enter the National Park to the west of Patching and leave it at Wiston. It is regrettable that the cable route is proposed through the National Park and that the existing cable corridor for Rampion 1 cannot be used. There remain significant impacts on the National Park as a result of both the onshore and offshore elements of the proposal, which officers are currently reviewing to inform our written representation. This will be brought before Members for consideration at December's Authority meeting.

4. **Progress of Existing Projects**

- 4.1 The delivery of the **Nature Recovery programme** across the SDNPA is in full swing. Examples include the *Changing Chalk dew ponds project* which has completed one pond restoration with another two underway. The *Cockshut Stream project*, a collaboration of Lewes DC, Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust and SDNPA, was completed at the end of August. A section of the 3km chalk stream has been restored through realignment to a meandering profile reconnecting to 6.8 ha of floodplain and creating new wetland habitats. The *Kingston Parish mapping project* has progressed with the report completed and a nature working group set up. Following the Call for Nature Sites (C4NS), launched November 2021, 53 initiatives have now been progressed with 13 completed, 21 still underway and 19 yet to start.
- 4.2 **Landscape scale approaches** continue to evolve across the National Park. The Defra funded *Adur Landscape Recovery Project* is in development with a project manager appointed. The window for the second round of Landscape Recovery bids closes on 21 September, with two bids for the South Downs - the re-submission of the *Arun Valley* proposal and a proposal from BHCC covering part of its downland estate centred around *Castle Hill NNR*.
- 4.3 Two important new initiatives from Natural England (NE) and one from the National Trust have the potential to make a real difference to core nature in the east of the National Park. *Lullington Heath* has been identified as one of a small number of "Super National Nature Reserves". Inspired by the Wild Purbeck initiative in Dorset, Super NNRS are designed to bring partners together to create much larger, connected, blocks of habitat. This would mean connecting Lullington Heath, Friston Forest, Seven Sisters Country Park, parts of the National Trust land and the Eastbourne Downland. But NE has also chosen the Seaford to Eastbourne chalk block as a *Nature Recovery Zone* – again one of a series across England. This is a much wider concept that would embrace all landowners, businesses and communities. It is an exciting idea but needs a great deal more work and thought - especially in terms of how to engage people early in shaping the process. On the opposite bank from Seven Sisters, the National Trust's *Chyngton Brooks* managed realignment/ breach project continues to progress, with the detailed design/feasibility and EIA scoping submitted to our Planning team.
- 4.4 **Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS)** are underway across the whole of England, led by the Responsible Authorities formally appointed by Defra. In our case these are HCC, WSCC and ESCC (the latter will work together with BHCC in a pan-Sussex approach). SDNPA, along with all the District and Boroughs, is a "Supporting Authority". Work is underway on stakeholder engagement planning, and we are currently waiting for project

plans from the Responsible Authorities to understand how we can best engage and influence.

- 4.5 Despite the uncertainty caused by the Nutrient Neutrality amendment and its subsequent defeat, landowners in the National Park are committed to delivering their **Nitrate Mitigation Schemes**, whilst developers remain eager to purchase offsets. This has led to firm commitment from two landowners to complete their land use changes secured through legal agreements in the coming months. This will deliver a further 60 ha of new space for nature. The SDNPA now has five BNG agreements at or close to completion and conversations taking place with a further three landowners. If finalised through legal agreements, these could provide a further 100 ha of new nature in the coming months.
- 4.6 Nationally, **water issues** continue to hit the headlines with almost daily stories about the long term damage to rivers caused by sewage dumping, nitrates, phosphates and soil run-off from agriculture and over abstraction. Sadly, the National Park is not immune and there are long term problems on all our major catchments which undermine our goals on nature recovery and climate action. We are pushing the water companies (Southern, Portsmouth and SE Water) to accelerate clean up measures in their next five-year asset management plans, and to invest in nature-based solutions such as new wetlands. This November a **Rother Summit**, involving more than twenty stakeholder organisations, will be hosted by us to encourage the creation of a vision, route map and costed action plan to restore this important National Park river.
- 4.7 Year three (23/24) of the **Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme** (FiPL) has seen continued demand, and as of September we have allocated nearly all of the 23/24 budget, and expect the remaining £35,000 to be allocated in the next few weeks. Due to the extension of the Programme to March 2025, we are now planning ahead to projects for the final year (24/25) to spend our £1,025,749 grant allocation. The next Local Assessment Panel meeting in January 2024, will review a number of large year four applications.
- 4.8 Since the FiPL Programme begun in July 2021, we have awarded £1,602,826 in grant funding to 102 FiPL projects with a total cost of £3,415,308 (figures to end of August 2023). Projects have included the creation and restoration of habitats such as chalk grassland, ponds and hedgerows, infrastructure to help implement regenerative farming practices, the provision of public and educational access and support for farm diversification enterprises.
- 4.9 Members will have noted on their recent visit to **Seven Sisters Country Park** (SSCP) the transformation of the site that has taken place over the last 2 years and the excellent work being done by the team there. As the summer season comes to an end, there is important work needed in preparation for next year, particularly in regard to the existing sewage system on site which needs replacing. The system serves our visitor centre and toilet block and also the other businesses on the site.
- 4.10 At the NPA meeting on 30 March this year Members allocated £250k to the **SSCP Sewage Treatment System project** to replace the existing reed bed system as part of the suite of Invest to Save projects. As work has progressed and a more detailed assessment of what is required was undertaken the project cost has been revised to £300k. Due to the need to progress the project as soon as possible with the aim of completing it by Spring 2024, on 21 September, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, I approved the allocation of the additional £50k to the project in line with the urgent action provision set out in order 18 of the Authority's Standing Orders. The required procurement process for the project was subsequently approved the following day at the meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee and the work will now continue apace.
- 5. Corporate Update**
- 5.1 An update on the **Climate Change Action Plan** went to P&R Committee on 21 September which highlighted the good progress being made on the following priority areas:

- Working with the wider National Parks family to establish NPAs as leaders in meeting the challenges presented by Climate Change;
 - Delivering ‘Net Zero with Nature’ – Linking our work programmes on both Nature Recovery and Climate Action;
 - Delivering emission reductions and high sustainability standards through the Planning System;
 - Supporting the Land-based sector to transition to a low-carbon future;
 - Working with our local communities and supporting them to become more resilient;
 - Collaborating with our Local Authorities and sector partners to deliver positive action;
 - Supporting rural businesses to adapt their operations to benefit from the transition to a low-carbon economy.
- 5.2 The Committee received a briefing on the likely impact on the National Park’s approach to ‘Net Zero’ of recent policy changes from Government announcements. Members were updated on the success of the joint application from the UK National Parks for membership of the UN ‘Race to Zero’ programme. This not only raises the profile of the SDNPA and the UK National Parks, it also makes a strong case for further investment to accelerate progress to Net-Zero. The Committee strongly supported the approach being taken by SDNPA on the national delivery plan for climate leadership.
- 5.3 One of the recommendations from the **Volunteering Review** was to move away from the separately constituted Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) model to a more direct relationship between SDNPA and our South Downs National Park Volunteers. The VRS was vital in establishing and growing a hugely valuable volunteer service across the South Downs since its establishment in 1981. Although theoretically still independent, in practice VRS volunteers have had a direct relationship with SDNPA through ranger or project teams since the National Park was established, so the proposals in the review bring theory and practice into alignment.
- 5.4 At their AGM in July, the current VRS Committee tabled three motions, the outcomes being:
- Volunteers voted unanimously to dissolve the VRS, with immediate effect.
 - They also unanimously agreed to annul the VRS constitution and all other existing agreements between the VRS and SDNPA.
 - All assets should immediately pass to the South Downs NP Trust Conservation Fund.
- 5.5 Volunteers are vital in delivering our work on the ground and we are looking forward to building on the strong foundation the VRS has created. All volunteers have been notified of the change to the volunteer model and have been reassured that their volunteering experience will continue as normal. It will be essential to involve volunteers in the change process. We have therefore established a new Volunteer Panel with geographical and thematic representation from all volunteer groups to support implementation.
- 5.6 **Income Generation** - It has been a successful period for income generation with £558k already secured this year. This includes around £433k secured across the Trust’s campaigns and £125k secured by the SDNPA to support our innovative Woodland Carbon Platform. In addition, we now have a total of over £4.5 million in the pipeline. This includes the recently submitted Innovate UK Bid, focused on funding for all parks to co-ordinate their climate Work (£2 million) and a DEFRA Landscape Recovery Bid for the Arun Valley (£729K). It also comprises full applications invited from EOI’s, such as Downs to the Sea (£1.5 million) and a Landscape Enhancement Initiative with the Selborne Farm Cluster (circa £200k). If only a proportion of these bids are successful, this will be a considerable achievement.

5.7 The new South Downs National Park **Trust website** has recently gone live. It is now a much more engaging and active site that uses the separate Trust brand but makes clear linkages to our own National Park website, brand and approach. The site will shortly be hosting the Trust's new annual accounts which, due to an annual income of £1.6 million, confirm its transition to a "Large" charity (as defined by the Charity Commission). This is a fantastic achievement, particularly given it is still just under 5 years since it was established.

6. Media and Communications

6.1 The **ReNature Festival** took place in July. Despite some issues with the weather, we were able to run 11 of the 15 planned events. The digital content for the Festival was seen by over 250,000 people with over 44,000 views of the videos.

6.2 Our wider **summer engagements programme** this year was all about enabling people to "Take Action for Nature and Climate". We have engaged with 1,625 people across 22 events. Over 170 people have now signed up to the pledge to take action for nature and climate. Events included some traditional seafront engagements and take the lead events, as well as balsam pulling, meadow management and butterfly spotting.

6.3 We also supported the **Walk the Chalk Festival**, a five-day arts and heritage festival with a number of events being held at Seven Sisters Country Park. This included welcoming 15 people to a Guided Climate Tour at SSCP led by our Ranger Lawrence and writers Alinah Azadeh and Georgina About from We Hear You Now, an art installation by Katy Beinart at the Pump Barn and a twilight visit to the site of the lost church a Exceat which inspired the installation.

6.4 Our **media and PR** work this summer garnered an impressive £115,000 PR value – giving the National Park excellent exposure from stories ranging from nature recovery success, to getting out and exploring our cultural heritage, to health and wellbeing.

6.5 We have generated over 100 pieces of media coverage across print, online and broadcast media, covering a broad range of topics. A highlight was the ReNature Festival coverage on ITV Meridian. Following our press release in March, a journalist from the Guardian came interviewed the Selborne Landscape Partnership which led to a double page spread.

6.6 Perhaps the biggest proactive story of the summer was the launch of the latest "In Their Footsteps" trails at Seven Sisters Country Park and Petersfield which received widespread local coverage locally.

6.7 Our social following now stands at 87,261 (up from 68,711 the same time last year). In that time, we have also nearly doubled the followers on our SSCP channels, to 7,108. On our website, our new Accessibility Hub, which was launched in June, has already had 2,500 visitors, many looking for practical information such as how to hire out the new accessible trampers and bikes at SSCP, QECP and Alice Holt.

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 11 July 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

