

Agenda Item 7
Report NPA23/24 -17

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **12 December 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 19 October 2023 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 From the National Park perspective, the King's Speech was notable more for what it did not include than for what was actually proposed. It was good news that there was no attempt to reintroduce the damaging nutrient neutrality exemption for new housebuilding but less welcome is the lack of any Defra environmental legislation that could provide a vehicle for some of the Glover proposals, particularly the introduction of a general power of competence for National Parks. There was also no mention of legislation to ban the sale of peat compost, which was promised by the end of this Parliament. The only Bill that comes within Defra's remit is the Animal Welfare Bill, which would ban the export of live animals for slaughter and fattening abroad.

2.2 The mid-November reshuffle saw the resignations of Therese Coffey and Trudy Harrison and the appointment of Steve Barclay as the new Secretary of State at Defra. His move from Secretary of State for Health to Defra means that we will now have a valuable link between the health and environment agendas right at the top of government. We often find it difficult to make the case for social prescribing and the provision of additional resources for outdoor wellbeing, even though the facts are well proven and the value for money of even a small transfer of funds from the health to the environment budget is undeniable. Now we have a Secretary of State who understands the benefits and can make the linkages.

2.3 The other new Minister at Defra is Robbie Moore, MP for Keighley and Ilkley and a long standing member of the Environment Select Committee. He becomes Minister for Natural Environment and Land Use. A current Defra Minister, Rebecca Pow, has taken over Trudy Harrison's responsibility for National Parks, with a new job title of Minister for Environmental Quality and Resilience. The final change at Defra is that Lord Benyon has taken on additional responsibilities to represent two Departments in the Lords – Defra and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The Chair of National Parks England has written to

welcome the new team and we have reiterated to their offices that they have an open invitation to visit the South Downs.

- 2.4 On Wednesday the **Government's response to its Glover review consultation** finally appeared, more than four years after Glover's report was published and one year and ten months after Defra's own consultation closed. The time Defra has taken to develop this response somewhat belies its statements about the urgency of action for climate and nature. Fortunately SDNPA and the other National Parks have not been waiting for the response but have taken a wide range of action on the topics covered by the review.
- 2.5 The pledge to "begin the search" for a new National Park stole all of the headlines and our response promised to provide every support to this work, on the clear understanding that a new designation must be funded by new cash. Much more significant was the announcement of an extra £10m for National Landscapes and Parks, although at the time of writing we do not know how this will be distributed. We also do not know whether it will represent a permanent upward shift in core grant, although the terms of the Defra statement suggests that it will.
- 2.6 For me the most important part of the response comes on page 5 which states "we appreciate our ambitious vision must be matched by equivalent resources". This is a very welcome acknowledgment from Defra after so many years of increasing commitments and expectations whilst reducing our grant support in real terms with flat cash settlements.
- 2.7 The announcement of £2.5m for a new phase of Generation Green to reconnect young people with nature is long overdue recognition of the success of this partnership which has been in abeyance awaiting such a decision. Again, we do not know exactly how the money will be allocated but we hope that it will allow us to recruit another post to expand SDNPA's existing work with young people.
- 2.8 The support for legislation to introduce the power of competence "when Parliamentary time allows" is good news but ignores the fact that the LURB Bill provided just such a suitable legislative opportunity that Ministers did not take.
- 2.9 Also significant is Defra's conclusion that there was no clear support for removing vehicular rights on green lanes (BOATs) so Government will not proceed with the proposals for further powers or restrictions, because "we believe that the current Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) process is legally robust enough to protect green lanes with carefully targeted local action to protect sensitive areas, while allowing vehicle users to responsibly enjoy the countryside". This aligns perfectly with SDNPA's own approach, established after the recent Member workshop.
- 2.10 We are still digesting all of the details of the Government's announcement and will be able to discuss further at the forthcoming budget workshop and NPA.

3. Planning

- 3.1 **Planning performance** continues to be good, with all government targets being met.
- 3.2 The increase in **planning application fees** comes into effect on 6 December. This will see fees increase (for the first time in a number of years) by 35% for major applications (10 homes or more) and by 25% for other applications. The Government's stated intention is to uprate planning application fees annually each April.
- 3.3 A significant planning application for 700 new homes in Lewes (referred to as the **Phoenix Project** and the largest residential application submitted in a British National Park), was considered at Planning Committee in October in Lewes. The application was deferred to allow the applicant more time to address a number of issues in order to allow Planning Committee to make an informed decision on this hugely important and strategic site. This complex application, that has attracted a huge response from the local community will be presented back to Planning Committee in the new year.

- 3.4 The **SDNPA Design Awards** return in Autumn 2024, 5 years after the inaugural – and highly successful - awards in 2019. These awards provide the opportunity to celebrate outstanding and innovative design in the National Park. Nominations will open in the new year.
- 3.5 In October plans were submitted to turn a former dairy farm, **Black Robin Farm** off Beachy Head Road, Eastbourne, into a culture, arts and education hub. The proposed hub would be operated by Towner Eastbourne. The applicant, Eastbourne Borough Council, has applied for a change of use of the site to include a cultural and education centre with business studios, refectory and event space, as well as the construction of a new gallery building. The proposals will come before Planning Committee in the new year.
- 3.6 The Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the upgrade to **Junction 9 of the M3** finished its 6 month examination period in 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. The Secretary of State's decision is likely around Summer 2024.
- 4. Progress of Existing Projects**
- 4.1 **Centurion Way** - The staged construction of the extension to the Centurion Way from West Dean to Cocking and the South Downs Way continues to progress. The first section from Singleton Station to the southern portal of Singleton Tunnel is complete and scheduled to open in Spring 2024 once licenses are in place and planning conditions are discharged.
- 4.2 Construction North through Wellhanger Copse was paused in the autumn due to ecological constraints but is expected to recommence in the first quarter of 2024 with this section completed by the summer.
- 4.3 Opportunities exist for the work south through Singleton Station to the northern portal of the West Dean tunnel to commence in 2024/25. This will be contingent on licenses being agreed on in early 2024 with the West Dean Estate, Heritage Railway Estate, and budget confirmation. This section will also require Listed Building Consent and further planning approval for work on the station platforms, which is currently being progressed. The option of taking the route through the West Dean tunnel continues to be evaluated with the expectation of being able to provide a case in late 2024.
- 4.4 We have recently updated the **Biodiversity Monitoring Framework (BMF)** in light of the new legislative environment, particularly the Environment Act 2021 and the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. Over time we will update further to take into account the pending BNG Regulations and Guidance plus the National Parks Management Plan guidance and Outcomes Framework which is expected shortly. The BMF defines how the Authority will measure and assess nature recovery in the Park, identifying how we prioritise our resource and setting out how we will work collaboratively together across Directorates.
- 4.5 Engagement with the **LNRS** process continues. Stakeholder Planning and engagement is now starting across all three LNRS strategy areas. Data and evidence collation is also underway which includes the evaluation of existing strategies and plans and mapping Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity.
- 5. Corporate Update**
- 5.1 On 22 November, nearly 40 delegates met at the SDC for the **Rother Summit**. This National Park river runs from its source at Empshott to join the Arun at Hardham. Landowners, angling and community groups, conservation bodies and government agencies looked together at the evidence gathered on its current state, and it was encouraging to see how much work is already happening and how many partnerships have formed. These include Himalayan Balsam control, regenerative farming, reconnecting the floodplain, volunteer monitoring and restoration of parts of the original channel.
- 5.2 The Vision for the Rother is a place where nature thrives in a more natural river catchment, food production works with nature, new woodland and wetland prevent flooding and store carbon, and people can swim and fish in clean water. Realising this vision will mean removing

structures, wider changes in land use, mink eradication, water vole and beaver reintroduction, and a major effort to reconnect the communities, schools and businesses along the valley with their river - so it becomes an object of pride not a neglected and forgotten place. It will require a clear overall plan, with a costed pipeline of projects. This will create leverage and momentum, attract support and bring in other stakeholders not yet at the table. There was consensus that every organisation present would contribute to this plan, and that the Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT) should lead the process with support from the SDNPA.

- 5.3 Given the huge size of the South Down National Park, this sort of local landscape partnership - at a scale that people can relate to and feels personal – is a key mechanism for achieving our purposes. Clarity of vision and long term commitment really matters if we are to get beyond short term funding cycles. We plan to kick start our vision for the Rother by applying for some of the additional £5m for improvements to the water environment in Protected Landscapes that was announced in Defra’s recent Glover response.
- 5.4 Next year we will need to start the second review of the **Partnership Management Plan (PMP)**. This needs to be completed by 2025, so we need to keep up momentum despite the ongoing delays in Defra which has yet to issue new guidance and a new outcomes framework. So the intention is that the review should begin in October 2024 and end in September 2025, allowing synergies with the Local Plan timeline. The process will be informed by the recommendations of the independent report on the last review done by Heritage Insider. It is likely that the review will be jointly commissioned by the NPA and the South Downs Partnership and that the evaluation of delivery and stakeholder engagement management will be outsourced.
- 5.5 Since my last report the **Income Generation** team have successfully secured £737k, a notable increase from the £558k obtained in October. This increase in funds is attributed to new support for the Trust, specifically allocated to support our Trees for the Downs, Beelines campaigns alongside the Outdoor Education Grant. Our funding pipeline remains robust with an impressive total nearing £5 million currently under development or consideration. We are eagerly anticipating updates on the imminent decision for our Innovate UK application, while outcomes for DEFRA Landscape Recovery and Landscape Enhancement Initiative applications are expected in the new year.

6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 **Dark Night Skies and Autumnal Events** - As the nights draw in our engagement work shifts to focus on our wonderful dark night skies and the creatures that inhabit them. The Heathlands Reunited team have been leading bat walks and moth trapping this autumn, and carrying out bat surveys alongside our ranger teams. The launch of our astrophotography competition received 18 pieces of prominent coverage across the region.
- 6.2 The pinnacle of our winter engagement is our annual Dark Skies festival which will run from 10 to 18 February with key events at Brighton Seafront, SSCP, QECP, Hogmoor Inclosure near Bordon and at Goodwood. The festival’s theme will be “Take Action for Nature and Climate: Embrace the Darkness”. A key goal is to reach new audiences, particularly from the urban fringe. Our dark skies engagement is not only a great way to bring the National Park to new audiences, but forms a core part of our responsibilities as an International Dark Skies Reserve. Last year we engaged with over 2,200 people through our in-person events and reached over 500,000 people with our digital content.
- 6.3 **Media & Digital** - November’s Countryfile episode about the western half of the National Park was a significant piece of media work. Nick Heasman gave a great interview about woodland management and our ReNature campaign. The programme went on to interview one of our woodland guardians and to feature stories on Gilbert White, the work of the Selborne Farm Cluster and Bignor Roman Villa.
- 6.4 Another highlight of our recent media work has been the huge response to a joint press release we put out with Pyecombe Golf Club which resulted in over 200 pieces of coverage nationwide including BBC Online, ITV, BBC Radio Sussex, 1 newspaper, Evening Standard,

Independent, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and big regional titles such as the Yorkshire Post and the Glasgow Times.

- 6.5 Our website had over 207,00 unique visitors, our social media has risen to 88,516 and our newsletter readership continues to grow steadily with a current readership of 10,900.
- 6.6 As the year draws to a close our engagement levels remain high with 525 entries to our annual photo competition, and people nominating their favourite tree for Spectacular South Downs Trees. A shortlist will be put to a public vote in December. The winning tree will win a selection of trees from the Trees for the Downs appeal to plant in their local area (with landowner permission, of course).
- 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 19 October 2023 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

