

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **28 March 2024**  
By **Chief Executive Officer (Interim)**  
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**

**Note**

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

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**1. Summary and Background**

1.1 This report provides an overview of the work that has been underway since the report to the 12th December 2023 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

2.1 This is my first report as CEO (Interim) and is an overview of activity and early impressions.

2.2 The **Spring Budget** contained few surprises and disappointingly little regarding the environment and climate action given it could well be the last major fiscal announcement before a general election. Concerns around the environment and housing feature in the top 5 of most polls yet there were few significant announcements. Ultimately, to shape a greener market, we need robust and clear central government policy and financial support. Whilst allocating £120m for green industries to develop technologies, including offshore windfarms and carbon capture and storage projects is welcome, fundamentally it's a drop in the ocean!

2.3 One of the small but needed measures was a nod to putting land used for nature on an equal footing with land used for food production, in terms of both now being exempt from inheritance tax, thereby providing greater options for a landowner / farmer. It's broadly good news for farmers looking to re-nature or enter natural capital markets, and encouragingly this announcement has been welcomed by the NFU.

2.4 Potentially less good news for the farming sector is the abolition of tax reliefs for Furnished Holiday Lettings (FHLs) in the face of a challenging economic backdrop. Tourism is an important source of diversification for farm businesses. It is a pillar of many a rural economy, particularly as the staycation sector continues to boom. This does however need to be balanced against issues arising from second homes and holiday homes pricing out local people from their own communities, a particular problem in some of the other protected landscapes.

2.5 There was some encouraging news on the cultural heritage front. Exhibition Tax Relief has been made permanent, solidifying a much-needed tax relief that has enabled ongoing operation when other income streams have reduced in the museum sector.

- 2.6 There are hundreds of village halls across the National Park and they remain an important community asset, with many being used for wider community activities such as climate action and health and wellbeing activities. So, it was encouraging news that £5m has been allocated to renovate venues across England, although we will have to see how much of this cash injection trickles down to our region.
- 2.7 Finally, a financial boost for the home-grown independent film industry is to be welcomed and can only be good news for a popular film set for some well-known global productions – Seven Sisters Country Park, of course.
- 2.8 The end of last year and the new year saw **various announcements and documents published by Government.**
- 2.9 In December came **‘Delivering 30x30 on land in England’**. More an overview of actions taken and funding streams available to meet the Government’s commitment to protecting 30% of our land by 2030 there were some key aspects for us. Chief amongst was the clarity provided over what types of land uses and land management currently count as action for nature recovery such as additional areas of woodland, local wildlife sites and chalk stream recovery projects to name but three. Equally significant was the indicative map showing for the first-time areas currently counting, and with potential to count, towards 30x30 on land in England.
- 2.10 Then came the **‘Protected Landscapes (PL) Targets and Outcomes Framework’** late January. Members have had the briefing note on this and a workshop so will not rehearse too much again. With 5 broad targets around plants and wildlife linking to Goal 1 of the 25 Year Environment Plan launched in 2018 and reviewed last year, 3 around climate change and 2 on beauty, heritage and engagement there is at least a spread that covers all parts of our Purposes. The drafting leaves much to be desired and there is a strange mix of ambiguity and absolutism.
- 2.11 More importantly it is the first time the PL family has had a united set of targets that we will have to work together on and divide up appropriately considering our ‘place’. Funding and resources will be attached to the creation and implementation of the targets and close working together will be essential. 18 months is the timeframe given to set out individual targets recognising local landscapes, partnerships and ‘other evidence’ and we are busy working on this.
- 2.12 Whilst we can debate the targets and the way data is used or what is considered to count and indeed our own 33% by 2030 target (which is more nuanced than the Government target) two things arise from this. Centralisation of approach. This applies to how we go about doing a PMP, planning and the move toward national development management policies, and working with the Protected Landscape Partnership (PLP) or the National Parks Partnership (NPP), both here to stay. The other thrust relates to data. We have been investing in looking at how we can collect, collate and share data that lets us and others know how we are delivering not only against our own PMP targets but against those set by Government. It feels as though this has been a wise investment as Government begins to firm up its plans for how we manage key data on issues such as nature recovery and access.
- 2.13 We are also in the age of **‘seek to further the Purposes (of the National Parks)’**. I have been working with colleagues from across the PL family and Defra on what interim guidance to supplement the skeletal Natural England advice could look like. The formal Statutory Instrument will be some time away and at the whim of a new Government. This new power needs to be used as collaboratively as possible whilst recognising it does have legal ‘teeth’. It is becoming clear there needs to be a collective focus on who is most likely to be subject to scrutiny in terms of fulfilling this duty as far as possible (hierarchy), recognising a sensible approach to all (proportionate) and consideration of using resources best and relying on a degree of trust with partners (certification or similar). These are emerging concepts, not set in stone but one thing is for sure, and I can already see as I visit colleagues and partners, that it is already enabling better conversations and pro-active dialogue. No-one really wants a legal case!

### 3. Planning

- 3.1 Planning performance continues to be good, with all government targets being met.
- 3.2 The introduction of **statutory biodiversity net gain (BNG)** from development has come into place for major applications (10 dwellings and above) received from 12 February and for smaller developments (note that householder applications are exempt) from 2 April. 10% Biodiversity Net Gain is required. England is the first country to implement mandatory biodiversity net gain for development and as BNG has been part of our Local Plan since 2019 we are well placed as a National Park to benefit from it. In some of the earliest guidance from any planning authority on this matter our Planning Committee considered and approved a Technical Advice Note on BNG at its March meeting and this is now on our website.
- 3.3 A significant application for 685 new homes in Lewes (referred to as the **Phoenix Project**, the largest residential application submitted in a British National Park), was considered at Planning Committee in February in Lewes. The application was resolved to be approved subject to the resolution of highway concerns and a Section 106 legal agreement to cover, amongst other things, 30% affordable housing including local low-cost housing, new flood defences and the exceptional sustainability credentials of the scheme.
- 3.4 The same Committee also considered a proposal at **Black Robin Farm off Beachy Head Road** for a culture, arts and education hub. With business studios, refectory, and event space, as well as the construction of a new gallery building all impacting but wider landscape benefits such as restoration of dewponds and a new permissive path, members debate was robust. The resolution to approve subject to outstanding matters especially in relation to the need for a Travel Plan, was passed by a one vote margin.
- 3.5 The Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the **Rampion 2 Offshore Wind Farm** started its 6 month examination period earlier this year. Officers are appearing at examination hearings with the representation approved by December's NPA underpinning officers' involvement. 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.
- 3.6 It has been a year since the devastating fire at **The Angel Inn, Midhurst** and the adjoining property. We share the desire of the owners and the local community to get these buildings back into use at the earliest opportunity. However, insurance matters are proving complex and the owners continue to work through the lengthy insurance claim process. In terms of the recovery of costs incurred by the SDNPA in undertaking direct action (where Members will recall we acted in partnership with Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council) this is well advanced. Monies have been received from one owner with the remainder due in the coming months whilst one owner has exercised their legal right of appeal to the cost recovery notice we served. This was planned for and we await details of the appeal.

### 4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 The construction of the **Centurion Way** continues to require careful coordination, a flexible and sometimes dynamic approach to maintain momentum. Approximately 1km of the extension was completed in 2023/24, comprising most of the section 3-West Dean to Singleton and all section 4-Cucumber Farm. Contractors have just completed the improvement to the West Dean Ramp, which with the A286 footpath improvement, will link to the open 9km section from Chichester and the new extension.
- 4.2 Ongoing ecological matters have further delayed construction north beyond Cucumber Farm through Wellhanger Copse until late 2024. The delay has however coincided with the opportunity to advance construction south from the derelict Singleton Station site. Following negotiations with the landowner, West Dean Estate, a new alignment of the route through the centre of the station site has been agreed. Funding is in place to complete the 2024/25 construction plans north and south.

- 4.3 This week marked the final stages of negotiations with Defra regarding their **Water in Protected Landscapes Fund**. I am delighted, after numerous calls and discussions, to advise we have secured full funding of £500k for a comprehensive **set of works at Seven Sisters**, encompassing the reed bed, new sluice gate and meander enhancements. The funding opportunity emerged shortly after Christmas for all National Parks, had imposing requirements and a need to spend or commit by end of financial year. I extend my thanks to everyone involved in the cross-organisational effort that was crucial in meeting the two-week application deadline!
- 4.4 Defra have committed £2.5m revenue funding to support work which builds on the success of **Generation Green**. This funding is to give young people access to a night under the stars, and to connect to nature, with a focus on those young people who have least opportunity to access. The Access Unlimited consortium, led by YHA and including all English National Parks as well as Scouts, Girlguiding UK, Field Studies Council, Outward Bound Trust and additionally this year, National Landscapes has been awarded the funding directly from Defra to deliver a 12 month programme of nature engagement from 1 April 2024. National Parks England are playing a role coordinating the National Parks in this project.
- 4.5 Connecting young people with nature and the multiple benefits that this brings, especially those from disadvantaged or under-represented communities, continues to be a focus. Delivery mechanisms will vary and we are looking to enable delivery to reach 558 new young people through nature connection sessions, Dark Night Skies evenings, one night residential and targeted youth engagement activities. This will enable us to reach new audiences from key demographics as well as testing and establishing delivery mechanisms that will establish a legacy for any future external funding bids. Again, huge thanks to those involved working at pace and with partners to secure the funding.
- 4.6 These two examples of ‘last minute’ government funding are not ideal, but is an increasing pattern. This underlines the importance of having a set of projects ready to go and a flexible approach so that we can respond. However, we will continue to make the case to government that longer lead-in times (and more reasonable spend deadlines), as well as better long-term funding commitments and a coherent approach, will ultimately enhance the quality of projects and outcomes on the ground for people and nature.
- 4.7 **Protected Landscape Partnership Induction** – For some years the future of our protected landscapes, how to better connect the public with nature, and how England’s 10 National Parks and 34 National Landscapes can better collaborate has been discussed.
- 4.8 As a response to the Glover Review the Government is now funding the new Protected Landscapes Partnership (PLP) consisting of all 44 protected landscapes. The PLP came into being during 2023 and has been recruiting staff to work alongside National Parks, National Landscapes and the National Trails. These roles cover nature recovery, evidence, climate action and EDI. To bring our new PLP colleagues up to speed a series of induction training sessions have been organised. The first was hosted by The National Trails in Plymouth, whilst a National Landscapes session is planned for March. We had the honour to host colleagues from the new PLP, National Parks England, National Landscapes, National Trails and Natural England in February.
- 4.9 We provided a full programme involving general principles of national parks and National Parks England (with input from NPE), specific subject areas covering Climate, Nature Recovery and Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity. We had fine examples of best practice to show and at lunchtime we enjoyed a walk over to the Midhurst Town Meadows and Cowdray ruins with Ranger Angela Ward.
- 4.10 Some of the key take away messages were that the new PLP needs to build upon existing work, best practice and relationships within the National Parks. It is also an opportunity to support the information flow and sharing of best practice across the protected landscapes family. Furthermore, it can help us to make the case that the protected landscape family is a

trusted partner(s) that can deliver against Government priorities and targets. Some of this means better showcasing of our projects and actions!

- 4.11 It was a pleasure to meet our new PLP colleagues and we hope that some of them will periodically hot desk with us at the South Downs (as well as the other NPAs and National Landscapes depending upon where they are based).
- 4.12 **The National Synthesis Report and Carbon ‘dashboard’** - we have been working with Small World Consulting to produce a high-level report for the UK National Parks. This builds on the work to develop and share a common approach to carbon assessments. It is intended to illustrate the contribution the UK Parks can make to achieving the UK national targets, particularly in terms of nature-based solutions. All the UK Parks and participating National Landscapes now have a standard carbon baseline assessment. This provides us all with a trajectory to achieve Net-Zero by a target date – with a focus on nature-based climate measures.
- 4.13 It highlights the key role that UK National Parks have in terms of climate action. It also seeks to make the case for investment to achieve this transition and to ensure we can effectively support our local communities to shift to a more sustainable, low-carbon future. It will also provide useful data and evidence for the UK National Parks to underpin our joint application to the ‘Race to Zero’ programme. The report was produced with support from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation – we are grateful to the National Parks Partnership for helping us to secure this additional funding support.
- 4.14 As year three (23/24) of the **FiPL Programme** ends, we have now allocated our annual budget of £602,868. This has supported 34 projects covering all of the nature, climate, people and place FiPL objectives, including support for on-farm education, infrastructure to facilitate regenerative farming practices, improved management for priority habitats and support for farmer skills training and knowledge transfer. The total spend for FiPL in the South Downs for years one to three of the Programme is now £1,616,743 across 117 projects. Looking ahead to year four (24/25), our Local Assessment Panel (LAP) have already approved £542,207 to projects, including the development of on-farm education centres. We look forward to working with farmers and landowners to develop more exciting projects to allocate the remaining £483,542 in 24/25. FiPL is currently due to end in March 2025, but we await further information from Defra about any future extensions.
- 4.15 SDNPA are supporting the **Friends of Rother Valley Way (FoRVW)** community group to progress the aspirational route predominantly following the former Petersfield to Midhurst railway alignment. Focus at the moment is on the section from Petersfield to Nyewood with meetings with individual landowners to negotiate consents in principle and engaging with stakeholders and local parish councils to gain further support, is key. FoRVW have also launched a website for the community-led project [www.rothervalleyway.org.uk](http://www.rothervalleyway.org.uk).
- 4.16 A new 3km section of **Egrets Way** opened in Q3 2023/24 providing a new path between Lewes and Rodmell, within Lewes Brooks SSSI, following the River Ouse. Almost half of the new path has been completed by our contractor. Due to excessively wet ground conditions and planned Environment Agency works along the route, the contractor demobilised site and will return in Q1 2024/25 to complete the top dressing of limestone dust to the other half of the new path. ‘Access for all’ has been introduced to a section of the Lower Ouse valley that has previously been under flood water for several months of the year.

## 5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 **Works to South Downs Centre** – You may notice works to replace the failed render and insulation on part of the South Downs Centre as you came in. As I write all the render and insulation has been removed making it possible to inspect the brick work for damage. Fortuitously the brickwork was in excellent condition and minimal replacement brick works means that the render contractors were able to start on site 3 days ahead of schedule. New insulation is starting to be fixed on to the building and is a step in our own climate action programme. At present we are still on track for an end date of 25th April 2024.

- 5.2 The closure of a third of the office space has caused inevitable disruption in the day-to-day use of the building but has allowed staff to engage with colleagues from different teams and directorates, for which we have received very positive feedback.
- 5.3 On Monday 8th January work started on a number of energy efficiency upgrades and general repair works at the **Seven Sisters Country Park**. These included upgraded the lighting to LED fittings in the Ranger office, Pump Barn and, Turkey Barn along with more comprehensive repairs to the Camping Barn.
- 5.4 During the strip out for the larger works to the Camping Barn it was discovered that additional works were required to replace a rotten door frame. Due therefore to the delay on the doors at the Camping Barn it has meant that the works at Exceat have progressed quicker than originally programmed and we received the office back 3 weeks earlier than planned with the Pump Barn and Turkey Barn also due to be returned in early March. The works to the Camping Barn will be completed in late March.
- 5.5 Eastbourne Town to Downs **signage** is nearing completion. This project has been funded by UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Natural England National Trails underspend. The project has integrated and expanded Eastbourne Borough Council's signage strategy to help navigate visitors to the South Downs Way from around the town, including a continuous signed route from the railway station to the SDW via the Towner Gallery. In total 16 signs and two totem maps have been fabricated to direct people to the SDW and will be installed in the coming weeks.
- 5.6 The **PMP** timeline is being worked upon and featured earlier in the month as part of **the PMP and Local Plan Review Workshop**. Together with the **Risk Workshop** held on 29th February in Lewes these are proving very useful for co-creating with members ways forward for the Authority as a whole. The timeline for the PMP is extensive and involves many partners. The handout from the joint workshop explains most of the detail. We do need to engage consultants to manage specific engagement and undertake the necessary Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitat Regulations Assessment. In October the formal launch of the process including assessing the main drivers for change will take place.
- 5.7 Members will be a key part of the process overseeing the development of the plan and being engaged in the thematic working groups as we develop the new plan. Initial ideas for themes are: nature recovery/biodiversity, climate action and net zero, landscape and cultural heritage, connecting people to the National Park for health and recreation, happy healthy communities which links to quality in design and build and jobs and skills. All these will be tested with yourselves and a wide range of partners.
- 5.8 As part of our approach, we have set up an internal project team and will be recruiting additional resource onto the **South Downs Partnership** who we hope will commission the process with Members and act as critical friends as well as being involved in thematic working groups.
- 5.9 In the past three months, we have made remarkable progress towards achieving our **Income Generation** targets. Pledged and secured income has risen from £737k just 6 months ago to nearly £2 million, with £900k earmarked for the Trust and just over £1 million directly benefiting the SDNPA. Noteworthy contributions include the £300k secured for the restoration and enhancement of the Selbourne Hangers through the National Grid's LEI fund, a £100k commitment from the Woodger Trust for the Centurion Way, and the previously mentioned substantial £516k grant from the Defra landscape recovery fund.
- 5.10 Included within these figures is also the £72k raised from the South Downs Trust event at Arundel Castle which I was lucky enough to attend. This celebration drew the participation of 110 prospects and donors, who enjoyed sustainable English wines and food while contributing to the South Downs cause in an extraordinary setting. Beyond the funds raised on the night, events like these expand the Trust's networks and prospects, exerting valuable South Downs soft power in the process.

## 6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 **Media** - our communications and engagement work continues to focus on delivering on our themes of nature, climate and people. Media over the last few months has focused on inspiring people to get out, explore and connect with nature over the winter months. Public affairs media included welcoming Defra's outcomes framework while calling for the powers and resources to deliver.
- 6.2 We pro-actively managed the media and narrative around large planning applications and positive stories about the Lewes Phoenix and Black Robin Farm applications were covered by the BBC, ITV, Brighton Argus and Architects Journal, among others. The Black Robin Farm piece is the most popular piece on the website for February, with over 1,650 views.
- 6.3 Other key highlights include promoting our inspirational **Timescape** project through a press release and video, getting widespread coverage in local and regional media for our announcement of **more than £3m CIL funding** to support local communities. An innovative new partnership and **recycling initiative at Seven Sisters Country Park** was covered by the BBC and local media and my first interview as Chief Executive (Interim) was covered in an upbeat radio interview on BBC Sussex and Surrey about life as well as work.
- 6.4 **Engagement** - bringing people on a journey with us sits at the heart of everything we do and our newsletter continues to grow steadily, with over 900 new subscribers joining following the online Advent Calendar Quiz in December which saw 4,000 people take part in a daily South Downs trivia challenge. The readership for the monthly update is now almost 12,000 – around three times the readership five years ago.
- 6.5 Our **Darks Skies Festival** had an “Embrace the Darkness” twist, encouraging people to think about the impact of light pollution not only on stargazing, but also on nocturnal wildlife and human health and wellbeing. Our events focused on urban fringe sites and sites that are accessible by public transport and attract large numbers from our target audiences. I attended the first dark skies event at Portsmouth Dockyard where we engaged with over 400 people, and we went on to engage with over 1400 people over the festival with packed events in Brighton and QECP. The weather meant we had to cancel two of the events, but overall a great boost to our engagement as an International Dark Skies reserve. It was lovely to welcome Dr Karis Petty, an anthropologist from Sussex University to carry out research at some of our events, as part of her project “Amongst Darkness and Light: Culture, Climate, Landscape and Experience”
- 6.6 At the end of February we were delighted to support and welcome **Muslim Hikers** to their first big walk in the South Downs National Park. 150 walkers joined staff from our Communications and Engagement and SSCP teams to enjoy a hike at SSCP. We are in discussion to develop a walk in the west of the National Park with the aim of engaging the Muslim communities in and around the National Park.
- 6.7 **Digital** - our digital channels, a vital window in to and out to the world continue to grow steadily. Our SDNPA social media channels have nearly 83,500 followers. This is an increase of over 15% on last year. Thriving social media channels support our work in many ways including recruitment, and our ad for a Climate Change Officer and Assistant Ranger Post reached more than 200,000 Facebook accounts and had nearly 6,000 engagements. This is reflected in the jobs pages on our website having 16,956 views in February alone. During Dec-Feb our website had more than 340,000 unique visitors.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1 My aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my appointment and that of the new Senior Leadership Team. We work together with partners and colleagues to ensure we continue to evolve and progress from the good position we are in. I could not possibly cover all matters. Happy to follow up where more details are sought before the meeting, or you 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