

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **9 July 2024**
By **Chief Executive Officer**
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**
Note

Recommendation: **The Authority is recommended to note the report and 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 the report to the 28 March 2024 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 With the election looming and prospective candidates jockeying for position there is some focus on the parties' priorities for the environment, agriculture, energy and protected landscapes. Rather than engage in speculation, which will be over by the time this is read, it is clear the environment is one of the top issues for many voters. All parties make various commitments in relation to nature, farming, energy and the environment generally. We will need to absorb and see what this might mean for us and the wider Protected Landscapes family. This should not, however, distract us from our focus on driving forward the evidence base for the Partnership Management Plan, engaging widely and thoroughly whilst addressing nationally and local set objectives, and bringing forward sites and revised / new policies for the Local Plan Review.

2.2 During the course of the past few months, I have met with the Assistant Director for Universal Services at Hampshire County Council, the CEO of Chichester Harbour Conservancy and the CEO of Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. In the case of the former, we have subsequently had a joint workshop. It is pleasing to see collaboration emerging around land management at Buster Hill and wider area, work on QECP centre and perhaps equally gratifying work further afield on other HCC-owned sites. With Chichester Conservancy we recognised similar approaches to nature recovery albeit in different contexts and the need to influence the transport sector. With the Conservancy being part of the South Downs National Park Learning Network, we can pursue education opportunities together and we have assisted in them getting their travel grant. They are hosting our educational team later in the year as we foster joint work. Long term we are working together to ensure protection of our shared long-distance views (The Gap) between the harbour and the Downs. This is vital in connecting our respective landscapes. This came home to me when viewing how clearly the Downs rise from the coastal plain – they really are one connected landscape.

- 2.3 Joint working on looking at the start / end of the South Downs Way with the HloWWT was encouraging given their increase in land ownership, commitment to ReNature and use of recent CIL to improve access especially up steep slopes to St. Catherine's Hill. An 'art of the possible' session is being planned to make the best of the opportunities we can both work on and mobilise volunteers.
- 2.4 By way of contrast, I met Caroline Lucas for a walk and talk at SSCP. In a wide-ranging discussion flowing from holiday cottages, through food production, to the need for the Natural History GCSE to highlight the role of Protected Landscapes, she was clearly enthused by the work we and partners have been carrying out. After all she has done for nature and the environment it was encouraging to hear her passion for our social inclusion programmes such as MIND, Timescape, and Make Good Trouble. This inspiring work is resource intensive but enables those who may need our help most, not only to enjoy the landscape but make a significant, sometimes life-changing, difference to their world. If nothing else, it shows the need to remain focussed on some of our key underrepresented groups amidst the bigger issues that grab headlines.
- 2.5 I accompanied Vanessa to the NPUK Chairs meeting at Loch Lomond. Always good to meet and discuss matters with other Chairs and CEO's, I was struck by how much we share and how powerful a collective voice we can be for the role of PL's in the UK. The two main presentations were on Nature Recovery and Climate Action. The first showed a map of the UK and where we were all working hard on ReNature projects, showing a real variety of approaches suited to the landscapes and objectives. The climate action piece featured much of the work of our own Chris Fairbrother and highlighted all 15 UK National Parks have been approved as members of Race to Zero! – the first National Parks in the world to join the programme. The Expert Peer Review Group (EPRG) were impressed with the rigour of our collective carbon footprint analysis, and they see UK National Parks as genuine climate leaders in our strategic approach. Our activity going forward will be structured around the 5 P's – Pledge, Plan, Proceed, Publish and Persuade.
- 2.6 Finally, shortly after my last report I met Rose O'Neil from the Campaign for National Parks who had just produced their State of Nature report. In a positive walk and talk session she recognised the good work we are doing for nature recovery way beyond their focus on SSSI's and felt we should promote ourselves more. She made clear their report and key recommendations were to assist us all in our goal to reverse nature's decline and exhorted us to be even more ambitious. I did make the point that we do seek to be ambitious but that can mean 'successful' failure – if we are held up in a negative fashion for failing, that can breed undue caution!

3. Planning

- 3.1 Year-end planning performance was subject to a comprehensive report at Policy and Resources Committee on 27 June. Planning performance in the previous and current financial year continues to be good, with all government targets being met. Indeed, in terms of speed of decision making we posted our best results for a number of years.
- 3.2 Horsham District Council have indicated that they no longer wish to continue to provide Section 101 planning services to the SDNPA. We are working to recover this service from 1 October. The remaining host authorities will be Chichester, East Hampshire, Lewes and Winchester.
- 3.3 In terms of the Local Plan review, and following recent Member workshops, colleagues are assembling evidence, assessing the suitability of sites for development, and which policies in our Local Plan might be changed or added to. We are also running a consultation from 8 July to 16 September on the key issues for the Plan to address, testing our 2050 vision and gathering feedback on how people want to be engaged in subsequent stages of the project. This will assist the Partnership Management Plan review. Members will be aware that we are the only National Park to administer the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), the subject of the workshop this morning. I am pleased to report that in 2023/23 we raised £1.95m which

will be used for projects that benefit people and nature across the National Park. The recommendations for CIL spending will be determined by Planning Committee in September.

- 3.4 Our Design Awards return this year with the winners announced at a ceremony in October. The quality of submissions was very high and we will be announcing the shortlist later this month. The same as the previous awards in 2019, there will also be a 'People's Choice Award' that will be awarded dependent on a public vote. The trophies – which look wonderful – are being hand carved by Alison Crowther at her wood carving studio in the National Park.
- 3.5 Last year the Government proposed extending permitted development rights so that agricultural buildings could be converted to residential dwellings without planning permission. Such a move would have been harmful to this, and other National Parks. We were part of a detailed consultation response led by National Parks England. I am pleased to say that the Government has now dropped this proposal in protected landscapes. The Authority is supportive of farm diversification, and our track record of planning approvals is strong, but we do consider that new residential dwellings on farms should go through the planning system.
- 4. Progress of Existing Projects**
- 4.1 **Youth Engagement Project** - We are delighted to have received funding as part of Defra's ongoing support of access to nature. The funding will help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to experience the wonders of our most beautiful landscapes and offers fully-funded visits to the SDNP for schools with over 30% Pupil Premium.
- 4.2 In order to deliver the increased engagement from this funding, we have recruited a 12-month project officer who started at the end of June. This post will deliver nature connection, Dark Night Skies and farm visit sessions across the South Downs. The funding will also support three schools to experience a one-night residential and eight young people to experience a two-night residential as part of our growing youth voice programme.
- 4.3 This year (24/25) sees the fourth year and final year as far as we know, of the **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** programme. Demand remains high and has seen our farmer-led Local Assessment Panel (LAP) approve 19 applications this year, totalling £511,358. This takes overall programme delivery, since July 2021, to 132 approved applications and £2,326,687 administered in grant funding to farmers and landowners in the SDNP.
- 4.4 As the range of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes are launched, and more funding streams become available to farmers, this year we have focussed FiPL monies to support projects where other funding sources are not available. This has primarily supported applications under the 'People' FiPL outcome and includes several projects that will develop facilities and support farmers to deliver educational activities with schools and others.
- 4.5 Another application that received full deliberation by the LAP was a plan to re-introduce beavers into a small waterway in Hampshire. In response to some initial concerns, a site visit, the first undertaken by the group, was conducted in early June. This allowed a full and open debate, in conjunction with the applicant, to air and discuss all views. It has, to date, been the most scrutinised application received, which following considerable testing of the FiPL National Framework, was approved to start this summer.
- 4.6 The 'Development Consent Order' (DCO) for **M3 Junction 9** Improvement Project was granted by the Secretary of State for Transport on 16 May 2024. The involving the widening of the M3 from a dual two-lane motorway to a four-lane motorway between the proposed M3 Junction 9 gyratory north and south slip roads to enable more free flowing traffic on both the A34 and M3 (north and south bound) without having to go through the current gyratory (which will be replaced).
- 4.7 During the whole DCO process, the SDNPA, together with other partners, was able to secure some additional improvements including the creation of additional chalk grassland and other species-rich grassland, a new walking and cycling route through Junction 9, providing links between down and into town and an additional 3m-wide bridleway on the eastern side of the scheme to link Easton Lane with Long Walk. Notwithstanding, it was a shame nothing more substantive was achieved, such as a green bridge connecting Down with Town.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 **SSCP Reed Bed Replacement Project** – Members will be aware the facilities at SSCP have been significantly upgraded in the past two years or so. Following issues regarding the performance of the existing Reed Bed at Exceat to deal with sewerage, together with an earlier decision to replace the existing Reed Bed with a new treatment system, we were successful in a grant application, albeit subject to certain criteria.
- 5.2 Two large sewage treatment tanks have arrived and the sewage treatment site area has now been cleared of all vegetation. A new outfall has been installed under the Litlington Road. Eventually receiving a permit from the Environment Agency, we are in a position to connect to the new system as soon as the physical works are complete, scheduled for August, with a much improved capacity and efficient system onsite fit for all our visitors.
- 5.3 **Seven Sisters Accommodation** - A soft phased launch started in January 2024 with an interim agreement with onsite neighbours Saltmarsh Farmhouse providing the visitor welcome and housekeeping services. This soft launch was vital for learning and review, particularly understanding the access challenges of the site and guest needs. Most importantly, guest feedback was overwhelmingly positive.
- 5.4 A formal procurement process for the management concession of all accommodation followed and a contract awarded to Cuckmere Cottages and Camping, a sister company of Saltmarsh Farmhouse. The contract has been awarded from 1 May 2024 for three years and they will undertake the management of the site for holiday accommodation.
- 5.5 The Camping Barn & Field, with the purpose-built facilities block, opened in April 2024, with advance bookings from education and activity groups for the summer season despite no marketing being undertaken. To date, bookings have predominantly been for one to two night stays for groups undertaking Duke of Edinburgh challenges, with notable exception for The Garden Classroom who stayed for two weeks providing outreach activities for year 6 inner city London children, to engage with the countryside. I went down and met some of the young people. It was inspiring to see the enthusiasm and sheer delight in what for some was their first visit to the countryside and camping.
- 5.6 In early May, Guardian journalist Joanne O'Connor and family stayed in the largest accommodation, Redshank Cottage. The extensive article on her Seven Sisters experience was published on 8 June and resulted in significant interest and bookings for the cottages. We are off to a great start and with others operating the holiday cottages and camping barn, we can continue to focus on implementing our landscape improvements and increasing the scope and frequency of events at the site.
- <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/article/2024/jun/08/secluded-south-downs-cottage-seven-sisters-england>
- 5.7 **Income Generation** has made a strong start to the year, securing £275k and having over £2 million in outstanding asks and applications. Part of the outstanding asks includes the recently submitted National Heritage Lottery application for "Downs to the Sea", a large multi-year partnership bid. We are seeking £1.7 million for this £2.5 million project, with the remainder made up through match funding. Notably, £250k of this has been secured by the Trust for Dew Pond restoration and the employment of apprentices.
- 5.8 I am particularly pleased that this project includes training opportunities for over 100 staff, landowners and volunteers, improved management of 307 ha of wet grassland and 70 health and wellbeing activities. The project extends beyond the South Downs, encompassing work in the Arun and Western Streams catchment and Pagham Harbour. Recognising that water does not respect National Park boundaries, we need to take a broader view to restore nature in and around the National Park. The final submission included over 23 documents and involved complex planning applications for habitat improvements. My thanks to everyone at the SDNPA for this cross-organisational effort.

6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 **Media** - We have had lots of positive coverage on the various aspects of our work over the last few months. Our Green Finance Summit was attended by the BBC and highlighted the launch of our voluntary biodiversity credits scheme with Earthly. The summit also featured in well over 200 media outlets, both mainstream and specialist, news sites such as Business Green and Carbon Pulse. Both Debbie Tan, CEO of Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, who was one of our panellists on the day, and I, were interviewed by BBC South.
- 6.2 There have been several smaller stories that have gained lots of traction regionally and nationally, including the launch of our health and wellbeing grants which was covered by the BBC and an array of newspapers from Winchester to Eastbourne. The success of the Trust's dew pond campaign was covered by BBC Sussex, the Brighton Argus and Envirotec.
- 6.3 Our **Engagement and events** has also achieved results. May was National Walking Month and we hosted a joint walk with Muslim Hikers at Queen Elizabeth Country Park near Portsmouth. The walk was attended by 165 people, with some from the local area and others travelling from further afield, many experiencing the South Downs for the first time, and pledging to come back and explore further.
- 6.4 Our **digital audiences** continue to be engaged and to grow steadily. On average we are reaching over 175,000 people per week across the three main SDNPA social media channels of Instagram, X and Facebook, with top posts including a story about the Long Man of Wilmington being painted green during WWII and exploring the Meon Valley Trail.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 My aim has been to provide an overview of the period since the last meeting. It is a snapshot and work with so many individuals and partners continues, as we move forward on Nature Recovery, Climate Action and National Park for All. This was evidenced at the last P & R Committee two weeks ago, where a long agenda so well chaired by Melanie Hunt included extensive information on last year's performance, and work we are undertaking this year. Happy to follow up where more details are sought before the meeting, or if 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

