

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **17 October 2024**  
By **Authority Chair**  
Title of Report **Authority Chair Update**

**Note**

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**Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to note the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.**

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 This report outlines the activities of the Chair and the Members of the SDNPA since the NPA meeting on the 9 July 2024.

**2. Update**

Member's Activities

- 2.1 August is generally a quieter time for members in terms of meetings at the Authority. However, the Appointments, Management & Standards committee were busy this summer with the CEO recruitment process. Interviews took place over the 8th & 9th August with recommendation of the successful candidate, Siôn McGeever, being approved by the NPA board on 22nd August. Thank you to Heather Baker, Tim Burr, Janet Duncton and Melanie Hunt, who form the committee alongside myself as chair, for their commitment this year.
- 2.2 Thank you as well to all members who were able to attend the extraordinary meeting of the board on 22nd August.
- 2.3 We had a workshop on the new Partnership Management plan on the 19th September. Many thanks to Anne Rehill for creating a collaborative space for members to input into the process and discuss where we can add value.
- 2.4 At our July NPA committee meeting, it was agreed that the Trading Company would go into dormancy and the management of Seven Sisters Country Park would be brought in house. This means that the three members who were directors on the Trading Company will be returning to our two committees.
- 2.5 Stephen Whale had already stated his intent to stand down as Chair of the Trading Company this year and I would like to thank him, together with the other directors, Chris Dowling and Stephen McAufflie for their commitment to this area of work. The Trading Company met monthly and was a considerable time commitment.

National Parks UK conference – 24th – 26th September

- 2.6 The conference of all 15 UK national parks takes place every 2 years. The event this year was hosted by Northumberland NPA with the theme of 75 years of Landscapes for Everyone. Basing the conference in Newcastle made the whole event easily accessible for all the attendees.

- 2.7 The first afternoon saw a panel of speakers, chaired by Karin Woodley CBE, Chair of Race Equality Foundation, answer the question posed to them, “Why do National Parks matter to us?”
- 2.8 We heard from Maxwell Ayamba BEM, Founder/CEO. Sheffield Environmental Movement, Dan White, Disability Rights UK, Rose O’Neill, Chief Executive for Campaign for National Parks and Jessica Davison, Ambassador for Campaign for National Parks. There was a plea for co-creation of inclusive access with disability champions; “nothing about us, without us.”
- 2.9 Some of the thoughts and feedback from the panel were uncomfortable to hear. Especially how minority groups still experience racism in the countryside. A good point made, is that not everyone knows what the etiquette is when visiting the countryside and are anxious about doing the right thing. There is still more work for us to do in making these special places inclusive and welcoming to anyone.
- 2.10 Before that evening’s dinner we were taken on an Urban Safari walk which took us along the river Tyne. The kittiwake population that live amongst the bridges were the main focus of the walk. The dinner itself was in the Glasshouse, Gateshead, after which we were treated to an after-dinner conversation with Jackie Morris, author & artist of Lost Spells & Lost Words.
- 2.11 The second day featured 12 different trips across the national park from visiting the Hepple gin distillery, the Breamish Valley, Kielder and Hadrian’s Wall, amongst others.
- 2.12 My own trip started at Hadrian’s Wall and visiting Northumberland NPA’s visitor centre The Sill. The Sill is a rural economy hub and visitors’ centre. The result of a collaboration between Northumberland NPA and the YHA on the site of an old YHA hostel. The new facilities are modern and accessible to all. At the time of our visit, we were lucky enough to see the installation of the new exhibition marking the illegal felling of the tree at Sycamore gap a year ago. Later we were taken to see a nature recovery project at Greenlee Lough which will see Northumberland National Park Authority working closely with farmers and landowners to restore peatlands, renaturalise watercourses, plant trees and create habitats. The peatlands were accessible on boardwalks which enabled you to get deep into the project.
- 2.13 The final day featured sessions on the great work that is already under way across our landscapes in making them more inclusive. SDNPA’s own project We See You Now was highlighted as good practice. When it came to looking to the future, the matter of making not just the people who visit our landscapes more representative of the nation, but also those who work at national park authorities and who sit on their boards, was a priority. The challenge laid down to us all was to go away and identify the next small thing we could do to forward this change and to not forget about the quick wins. Embedding the 10 Principles that facilitators the Soil Collective gave us will be a good starting point. Something to pick up at our next EDI workshop.
- 2.14 Special thanks go to our co-optee, Mo Findley, who attended the conference along with members Melanie Hunt, Tim Burr and myself, as well as Tim Slaney and Laura Sercombe. Mo flew the flag for the co-opted model as a way of getting better representation onto boards. He was a fantastic ambassador for the Authority, and we were all very proud of our whole team. Several other NPAs are now looking to replicate co-opting that at their authorities.

National Parks England

- 2.15 In my role as Chair of NPE I have carried out the following activities.
- 2.16 At the end of July, I attended the Defra Summer event at Garden Museum, London. It was a well-attended event, with many campaigners there as well as leads from Protected landscapes. Secretary of State Steve Reed made his speech, outlining his 5 priorities (clean rivers, lakes & seas; Flooding; Nature Recovery; zero waste and food security) for his department. I was able to speak to our new Nature minister Mary Creagh and the Secretary of State.
- 2.17 At the beginning of August, I attended the Defra’s Arms-Length Bodies meeting, which was chaired by the Permanent Secretary Tamara Finklestein.

- 2.18 On 4th September, NPE was invited to a meeting with Minister Emma Hardy ahead of the announcement of the Water Special Measures Bill. Other attendees apart from myself were, Waterwise, Wildfowl & Wetland Trust, Wildlife Trusts and the Rivers Trust.
- 2.19 On 5th September I attended the Defra launch of the Water Special Measures Bill in London. I was able to speak with Minister Hardy and highlight the good work National Parks are doing with farmers to reduce agri-pollution. This should be the subject of a third water bill coming shortly.
- 2.20 On the 11th September I attended a board meeting of Protected Landscapes Partnership board, chaired by Amanda Craig, head of protected landscapes at Natural England.
- 2.21 12th September, I spoke and was on a panel at this year's Campaign for National Parks conference which was held in the South Downs. There were good debates in the rooms off the back of recent press. It was lovely to meet 2 of our new Youth Ambassadors.

Transport for South-East

- 2.22 Thank you to Tim Burr for attending the Transport for South-East board meeting at the beginning of September and the Hampshire 2050 'Year of Health and Wellbeing' event the following week.

**3. Conclusion**

- 3.1 I am happy to respond to any questions that may arise from this update and will provide any further updates as needed at the meeting.

**VANESSA ROWLANDS**

**Authority Chair**

**South Downs National Park Authority**

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive (Interim); Head of Governance.
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None

