

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

### **AUTHORITY MEETING**

Held at 1pm on 10 December 2024 in the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH.

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Tim Burr, Antonia Cox, John Cross, Debbie Curnow-Ford, Chris Dowling, Janet Duncton, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, John Hyland, Stephen McAuliffe, Robert Mocatta, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Daniel Stewart-Roberts, Vicki Wells and Stephen Whale.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Siôn McGeever (Chief Executive Officer), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Tim Slaney (Director), Mike Hughes (Director of Planning (Interim)), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Liz Gent (Performance and Project Lead), Nigel Manvell (Chief Finance Officer), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Kathrine Stuart (Planning Policy Lead), Claire Tester (Planning Policy Manager), Amy Tyler Jones (Planning Policy Lead) and Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services).

### **CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS**

176. The Chair welcomed all present and provided general housekeeping information. She welcomed Siôn McGeever as the new Chief Executive Officer of the SDNPA and thanked Tim Slaney and Mike Hughes.
177. The Chair thanked Nigel Manvell for his service as Chief Finance Officer.

### **ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

178. Apologies were received from Peter Diplock and Gary Marsh.

### **ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

179. The following declarations were made:
- Robert Mocatta declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 8 as a Hampshire County Councillor and East Hampshire District Councillor.
  - Mark Fairweather declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 as a Wealden District Councillor who had previously been consulted by the SDNPA on New Barn Farm.
  - Vanessa Rowlands declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 as a Cuckmere Valley Parish Councillor.

### **ITEM 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS HELD ON 17 OCTOBER 2024**

180. The minutes of the Authority meeting held on 17 October 2024 were approved as a correct record.

### **ITEM 4. URGENT MATTERS**

181. There were none.

### **ITEM 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

182. The Chair invited Frank Davies to address the Authority for up to three minutes.
183. Frank Davies spoke on the matter of the Angel Hotel in Midhurst.
184. Members were advised that the sites referred to by the public speaker were privately owned sites and that further resolution was dependent upon insurance claims being settled. The

Authority had previously written, with Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council, to the Association of British Insurers to express concern over the delay.

**ITEM 6. AUTHORITY CHAIR UPDATE**

185. The Authority Chair introduced the report (NPA24/25-22).
186. Members made the following comments:
- Could further details be provided on the Chair’s proposed meeting with Mary Creagh, Minister for Nature?
  - Please also request the Minister to finalise the approval of the new East Sussex Parish Member, Paul Bevan.
187. Members were advised:
- The Chair would be attending the meeting with the Minister in her role as Chair of National Parks England (NPE) accompanied by Jayne Butler, Director of NPE. This would be an initial meeting and the principle item on the agenda was funding for National Parks.
188. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

**ITEM 7. CHIEF EXECUTIVE’S PROGRESS REPORT**

189. The Chief Executive introduced the report (NPA24/25-23) and provided the following updates:
- The SDNPA Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document did not win the Royal Town Planning Institute national award for ‘best plan’, but it was a real honour to have the document shortlisted.
  - 54 members had joined the Knowledge Hub since its launch.
  - The Blacknest Fields Nature Recovery Project and Energise South Downs had both won category awards at the CPRE Hampshire Countryside Awards 2024 and were both in the running for overall winner. The decision would be announced on the evening of 10 December 2024.
190. Members made the following comments:
- Had the costs associated with the provision of scaffolding to the Angel Hotel been reimbursed, and if not when was reimbursement expected?
  - The remaining wall of the Angel Hotel was exposed to the elements. Was there a risk of further damage?
  - Was there anything the Authority, National Parks England, or National Parks UK could do about the lack of media coverage on nature and the environment?
  - Pleased to see the recent press coverage of the work the Authority was doing with schools and to note that the SDNPA was halfway to its commitment to providing an additional 13,000 hectares for nature.
  - Encouraged by the success of the Fair Game project and the achievement of winning the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) Archaeological Achievement Award in the sustainability category.
  - Keen to promote the work and achievements of the Authority on Bluesky.
191. Members were advised:
- Progress had been made on cost recovery. A final payment was scheduled for January from one owner after which the amount agreed would have been repaid. The other

owner had exercised their statutory right of appeal, so further progress was awaiting the appointment of an inspector to determine what, if any, money was to be repaid to the Authority.

- The structural integrity of the Angel Hotel was being carefully monitored. It was inspected monthly from a safety perspective by a structural engineer.
- The 75th anniversary of the National Parks was upcoming and could act as an anchor for media coverage as the State of Nature report had done earlier in the year. The Comms team would be preparing stories ready for news items as they occurred, such as the water bill scheduled for the new year.

192. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report.

#### **ITEM 8. LOCAL PLAN REVIEW: REGULATION 18 CONSULTATION**

193. John Cross joined the meeting.

194. The Planning Policy Manager introduced the report (NPA24/25-24) with two Planning Policy Leads.

195. The Chair of the Planning Committee commented that this was a light touch review that had benefitted from considerable officer time, a number of Member workshops and had been scrutinised by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 14 November. It was important to get as much public feedback as possible.

196. Members made the following comments:

- Would be good for Members to highlight this review to their parishes, districts and communities.
- Would there be an explanatory letter accompanying the consultation to explain the context?
- Concern about the timing of the consultation given the upcoming changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Should the consultation wait until those changes were known, given that the existing Local Plan was of a high quality?
- Concern that further sites would come forward after the consultation had concluded. Should sites be included in the Local Plan that had not benefitted from public consultation?
- Concern that the new NPPF and Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) may request that the Authority re-consider accepting sites on the boundaries of the National Park.
- Could it be confirmed that there was a Whole Estate Plan policy as presently in the draft plan or equivalent.
- Could more comfort be provided that the Authority was consulting on proposed site allocations in circumstances where the document did not have an explicit housing need or supply figure.
- Welcomed the creation of specific content for younger voices. Was this a new initiative and if not were there any learnings from previous attempts?
- Was there any guidance available to Members on how to present the carry-forward sites?
- Concerned about the rumoured proposal to reduce the powers of Planning Committees. Could Officers advise on the likely effect of that proposal on the Authority?

- Would any weight be given to sites that had escaped public consultation because they were submitted afterwards? Could that be held against them?
- Welcomed the change to SD29 and the addition of flexibility for exception sites and for adding the Meon to the list of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) through the compensatory habitats piece from Natural England.
- Concerned that the lack of overall housing figures could encourage developers to reduce the affordable housing numbers being proposed. Were supply figures needed to ensure delivery against our statutory duty to foster the social and economic well-being of communities within the National Park?
- It was imperative to go out to consultation early in the year. Any delay could lead to the loss of the work already done on the plan for the last two years and imperil Village Design Statements and other planning documents.
- How would the SDNPA ensure that sites it did not want developed were not developed?
- Given that it was expected that the new NPPF was likely to be issued this week raising the possibility that the document could be out of date, in some respects, after that, and bearing in mind the risks associated with delaying approval, could recommendation three be amended to include 'and any changes necessitated by any new NPPF / PPG' at the end of the recommendation?

197. Members were advised:

- There was some explanatory information in the introductory text but Officers would consider whether a separate document should accompany the consultation to provide fuller context.
- Officers were well-sighted on potential changes to the NPPF and Planning Practice Guidance (PPG). Housing need numbers were likely to increase but the National Park would be capacity led so that change would not impact the Local Plan. An up-to-date Local Plan was not just a means to protect the Park from speculative development but was an opportunity to improve the Authority's policies and was an implementation tool for the Authority's Corporate priorities.
- It was not within the gift of the Authority to stop sites coming forward for the Local Plan at any stage of the process, even during examination. Officers needed to deal with sites as they came forward and to attempt to keep people as involved in the process as practicable. They would not receive less weight just because they came forward later in the process, if the site was acceptable in planning terms then the Local Plan Inspector was likely to agree its inclusion in the Local Plan.
- The national planning framework was subject to constant changes and that would continue. There were risks associated with delaying the Local Plan as that would prevent the Authority bringing forward policies on carbon net-zero and water quality.
- Reference to Whole Estate Plans in SD25 remained unchanged in the Local Plan.
- The legislation on Regulation 18 consultations was loose in terms of what had to be included. Officers were of the opinion that it was right to get feedback on sites to inform the Authority in terms of what capacity was available going forward.
- Youth engagement had been tried previously and had proven tricky to get young people interested in these types of consultations. Officers were seeking to improve engagement by working with the Partnership Management Plan consultants and Youngwilders, a resource which they had not previously had access to.

- Carry-forward sites were only open to change if the circumstances or evidence had changed.
- There was nothing in the Local Plan review that would be impacted by the rumoured proposal to modernise Planning Committees. Further discussions would be had with Members at the January Planning Committee workshop on the proposals to modernise Planning Committees.
- The existing Local Plan, which contained housing numbers, would provide sufficient evidence to battle against any loss of affordable housing and to argue for the delivery of affordable housing.
- Nowhere in the headline changes to national policy was there any watering down of protections for National Parks

198. Janet Duncton joined the meeting.

199. It was proposed and agreed that Recommendation three be amended to include the words “and any changes necessitated by any new NPPF / PPG” at the end of the recommendation.

200. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the Community Involvement Plan for the Regulation 18 consultation (Appendix 1);
2. Approved the Regulation 18 consultation for the South Downs Local Plan Review (Appendix 2); and
3. Delegated authority to the Director of Planning, in consultation with the Chairs of the Planning Committee and the National Park Authority, any minor and presentational changes to the regulation 18 consultation document and any changes necessitated by any new NPPF / PPG.

201. The meeting adjourned for a short break.

#### **ITEM 9. SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK NEW BARN COTTAGE AND CAR PARK IMPROVEMENTS CAPITAL PROJECTS AND OTHER CAPITAL VARIATIONS**

202. The Performance and Project Lead and the Chief Finance Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-25).

203. The Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee commented that the committee had looked at the capital variations and were happy that the funding sources were clearly identified and supported approval of the recommendations.

204. Members made the following comments:

- Supported the renovation of New Barn Cottage. What was the anticipated final end use of the property?
- What was the necessity for moving the car parking machine by the meanders?
- It was imperative to keep the car park as safe as possible.
- Was there an envisaged period for payback on the investment in Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP). It would be good if the income generated could match the costs associated.
- Would any car parking spaces be lost when re-lining the car park at SSCP? Were there any plans to put solar panels on top of the car park?
- Has consideration been given to booking parking spaces once the number of spaces has been confirmed, similar to the system in place at West Wittering?

- There was currently a lot of verge parking on busy days around SSCP so improvements to the parking would be welcome.

205. Members were advised:

- Officers were exploring whether there was any covenant or restriction on the use of New Barn Cottage before deciding on a use. It was not anticipated that New Barn Cottage would be a commercial let, local partnerships were being explored for a residential use. The primary reason for the work was conservation to prevent further damage to the property and ensure it could be habitable for future use.
- The design of the parking ticket machine meant that it was susceptible to failure in the event of flooding.
- The National Trust were closing Birling Gap to coaches soon, so SSCP would be the only site available to them along the heritage coast. There were no defined coach spaces currently. The new layout would provide details on the number and type of parking spaces and the design work was still to be done. The floodwater/rising groundwater issues in the Southern car park meant that it was not suitable for solar panels. The northern car park was a more likely site but there was an issue with the tree cover.
- The West Wittering system involved automated barriers that would require a significant investment in the region of £200,000.
- The investment being requested was part of a larger suite of measures to improve parking around SSCP, and Officers were discussing working with the Forestry Commission to investigate the viability of providing a shared solution that would deliver at scale.

206. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved a capital variation of £27,000, to provide a capital budget of £207,000, for the New Barn Cottage at Seven Sisters Country Park capital scheme and approve the capital scheme, as set out in section 3 of the report, as part of the approved capital programme for 2024/25;
2. Approved the Car Park Improvements at Seven Sisters Country Park capital scheme, as set out in section 4 of the report, as part of the approved capital programme for 2024/25; and,
3. Approved the other capital variations of £86,000 to the capital programme as recommended by Policy & Resources Committee as set out in section 5 of the report.

**ITEM 10. SDNPA RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT’S CONSULTATIONS ON “ENABLING REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND PROXY VOTING AT LOCAL AUTHORITY MEETINGS”**

207. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-26).

208. Members made the following comments:

- Did not support the principle of proxy voting unless the Member had been able to hear all the evidence in the meeting.
- There were potential difficulties around hybrid meetings as there was a risk that remote participants could become second class participants in the meeting.
- A well-organised hybrid meeting could avoid the issues for remote participants. In the case of Member workshops, direct participation was important to make the most of the event. Long commutes did incur a carbon cost.

- Supported the principle of flexible working. Remote access could increase participation and allow diverse voices to participate, but in-person was where inclusion really occurred.
- Meetings were better in person, but the option for remote participation as an exception was important.
- Should hybrid meetings be allowed, it was unlikely that in person attendance would remain as high as it was.
- Connectivity issues could make joining remote meetings difficult.
- The mitigations, local arrangements, and opportunities to set the tone in how the SDNPA wished to implement the options recommended in the response were good, but to deny the offer completely would be counter to the Authority seeking to open up participation in decision-making.
- Could a Planning Committee decision be challenged if Members were participating remotely?

209. Members were advised:

- The default position in the response was that Members would attend meetings in person to promote high quality participation, debate and transparency. Remote attendance would enable people who had certain or exceptional circumstances to be able to attend and participate.
- Officers would consider what provisions, local rules and standing orders might be necessary to ensure that decisions could not be challenged and that there was confidence that Members were present for the whole debate before coming to their decision. This would likely be along the lines of the policy used during Covid whereby if a Member went away from their seat and didn't respond to a message, they were deemed to have left the room for that item.

210. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Received and considered the draft response to the Government's consultation on "Enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings" as set out at Appendix I; and,
2. Delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to finalise the Authority's response, taking into account any comments of the Authority, and to submit the response to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

## **ITEM 11. BOARDROOM APPRENTICE SCHEME**

211. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-27).

212. Members made the following comments:

- The Boardroom Apprentice Scheme was a great way to increase diversity. Loch Lomond National Park had been participating in the scheme and the Peak District National Park had recently agreed to join the scheme. Other National Parks were also considering signing up to the scheme.
- Would the apprentice be able to participate remotely during the placement period?

213. Members were advised:

- Currently all participation in Authority meetings required in-person attendance so the apprentice would be required to attend in-person, rather than remotely.

214. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the details of the Boardroom Apprentice Scheme as set out in the report.
2. Agreed that the South Downs National Park Authority acts as a Host Board for a Boardroom Apprentice.

**ITEM 12. APPOINTMENT OF AN INTERIM CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER**

215. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-29).

216. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the retirement of Nigel Manvell, Chief Finance Officer, on 28 February 2025; and
2. Appointed Craig Garoghan, Head of Finance at Brighton & Hove City Council, as Interim Chief Finance Officer, pursuant to section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, of the South Downs National Park Authority with effect from 1 March 2025 until the appointment of a permanent Chief Finance Officer.

**ITEM 13. PLANNING COMMITTEE**

217. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 12 September and 10 October 2024.

**ITEM 14. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

218. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 19 September 2024.

219. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.12pm.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_