

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **10 December 2024**
By **Authority Chair**
Title of Report **Authority Chair Update**

Note

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

1. Introduction

1.1 This report outlines the activities of the Chair and the Members of the SDNPA since the NPA meeting on the 10 December 2024.

2. Update

Member activities

2.1 Members attended a workshop on 30 January, which covered the Corporate Plan extension, the forthcoming Budget and Devolution with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The day gave a chance for Members to debate the challenges and opportunities that we could potentially face from Devolution and LGR and for officers to get a sense of the risk appetite of the board.

2.2 There was a Strategy Day on Rivers & Streams on 27 February. It was a very informative day with a range of external speakers. Thanks to John Bryden from the Rivers Trust, Emma Goddard from SE Water and Sandra Manning-Jones, an ecologist who is working on a report on the catchment-based approach to rivers that will feed into the PMP process, for coming and talking to us. The morning gave us a real sense of where the issues are in terms of water pollution and river health and where SDNPA could have the most impact. In the afternoon we visited the Cockshut stream restoration and nearby Lewes Railway Land project. The Cockshut stream realignment project won the People's choice award in our SDNPA Design awards last year.

2.3 Many thanks to all the officers for planning and supporting these workshops which provide invaluable training and evidence for Members to understand.

Planning Away Day

2.4 The Planning Committee had their annual workshop with officers on 16 January, where they covered the latest changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), updates to water neutrality, calling in of applications and post-permission monitoring and changes. It was a very productive session and really showed the good working relationship between officers and members.

Local Politicians

- 2.5 I have continued building relationships with our local politicians. Some new into their roles such as Gregory Stafford MP for Farnham & Bordon and Jess Brown-Fuller the MP for Chichester, as well as longer serving parliamentarians, Baroness Cathy Bakewell, who is a Hampshire resident and leads on Defra issues for the Lib Dems in the Lords and Andrew Griffiths, MP for South Downs & Arundel, who has always been such a fantastic supporter of the Authority.
- 2.6 I want to thank all the officers who helped devise the itineraries and the ranger teams for taking our visitors out in the Park. We were able to show them many of the fantastic projects this Authority is delivering.
- 2.7 Alongside, Siôn McGeever, I have attended meetings with leaders of the three County Councils and Brighton & Hove City Council to discuss devolution plans and local government reorganisation.

Parish Workshops

- 2.8 Parish members took part in an online information evening on the 19 March for the parishes across the Park, providing summaries of the Authority's activity along with an introduction and update from Siôn.

National Parks England

- 2.9 National Parks England has been in regular dialogue with civil servants at Defra over our funding settlement. At the time of writing, letters are still to be received by NPAs.
- 2.10 As chair of NPE, I sent a letter to the Treasury requesting being added to the list of public bodies that will receive mitigation against the rise in NICs. I am still awaiting a reply. Copies of letters and statements can be found on the NPE website <https://nationalparksengland.org.uk/news>.
- 2.11 We have had support from many of our MPs across the Country. In the South Downs, Damian Hinds and Chris Ward both wrote to Minister Creagh to support the need to keep or increase our funding and Peter Kyle and James MacCleary both wrote to the Treasury team regarding NICs.
- 2.12 I chaired an online NPE board meeting in January and the South Downs will be hosting a 2 day, in-person board meeting in April.
- 2.13 I attended a pre-board meeting of the Protected Landscape Partnership in February, with the next board meeting is in late March. The Protected Landscape Partnership is a body where Natural England, National Parks, National Landscapes and National Trails come together to collaborate across our shared priorities of Nature, Climate, People and Place.

Member Activity on External Bodies

- 2.14 Antonia Cox and Paul Bevan and I attended the launch, in early March, of the Sussex Heritage Design awards, at the recently renovated Saltdean Lido. The three of us will be part of the judging panel for the SDNPA-sponsored award later this year.
- 2.15 The Deputy Chair Tim Burr has, since our last meeting, attended meetings of five external bodies on behalf of the Authority. These were Transport for the South East (TfSE); the Campaign for National Parks (CNP); the South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF), with Andrew Shaxson; the South Downs National Park Trust (SDNPT), with Stephen McAuliffe; and the Wider South East Freight and Logistics Forum (WSEFF).
- 2.16 TfSE discussed vehicle charging infrastructure, with reference to commercial vehicle fleets including buses and trucks. The spacing of charging facilities has to reflect not only the distance a vehicle can travel per charge (ie 'range'), but also the availability of electricity across the distribution network. Meeting these criteria constrains the choice of sites, and where indicated locations happened to be in protected landscapes, it could be difficult to resist such a site, with the extensive lorry parking and driver welfare facilities that it would also require. We emphasised that landscape impact, and NP purposes, must also be given due weight.

- 2.17 Similar issues were debated at WSEFF, which brings together the East Anglian and ‘Heart of England’ transport bodies, along with TfSE. Here there was concern about the disjunct between the regional/national focus of transport planning, and the local focus of District planning authorities. Unless they passed the threshold for strategic national infrastructure, logistical projects like warehousing or truck parking tended to be judged on local criteria, when their economic relevance was much wider. Intermodal freight was another topic, where progress has included ‘Tesco trains’ operating mainly in the North and saving 600 lorry journeys per day. The South-East, however, has no intermodal freight depots, as journeys from southern ports have been seen as too short to justify intermodal transfer. But Tesco are starting to challenge this assumption too, so watch out for some major new infrastructure here.
- 2.18 The theme of the CNP’s Council and Annual General Meeting was ‘reimagining National Parks’. The Minister for Nature, Mary Creagh, pulled out just beforehand, but sent a letter which among other things said the Government was committed to revamping the governance of National Parks, in the following terms: ‘By bringing a wider range of voices, skills and perspectives into decision-making, we can ensure that boards reflect the needs of the communities they serve.’ an interesting perspective which sets NPs in the context of ‘communities’, though the Minister did go on to highlight their ‘national importance’. NP governance has been a preoccupation of CNP too, though nothing emerged from the subsequent Council discussion by way of specific proposals. Guy Shrubsole, author of ‘Who Owns England’ was one of two other invited speakers, who unsurprisingly focussed on land ownership, concluding that public ownership was probably not feasible, so it would be necessary to manage the landowners instead. They should be required to produce ecological assessments of their land as a baseline for nature recovery. The other speaker, Mary- Ann Ochota, currently of CPRE, bewailed public ignorance of NPs and of ecology generally, and advocated for NPs to work with local schools, and to connect with children beyond their boundaries.
- 2.19 The SDLAF is newly active under the chairmanship of Doug Jones, former Authority member and Chair of the P&R Committee, following a period when it was hampered by fallout from SDNPA staffing reductions. Core work centres on public access land, and on Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plans (LCWIPs); both our own, and through inputting to consultations on those of our County Councils (as Highway Authorities).
- 2.20 There was some useful reflection on access priorities, questioning the expense and generational timescales of long-distance routes, and leaning towards more local, ‘last mile’ pathways connecting to public transport and local amenities. Such networks might be promoted through conditioning of planning consents for new housing development.
- 2.21 Finally, the SDNP Trust, but bearing in mind that it is and has to be independent of the Authority; and that Tim, Stephen and also Janet Duncton attend in their capacity as trustees: appointed by the Authority, but not as its representatives. The Head of Charity Report (James Winkworth) was well received, with permission to start now secured from the National Lottery for the ‘Downs to the Sea’ project, and with a strong team in place. The Lottery have also approved a further year of funding for Ouse Valley Climate Action. Donor income was ahead of the Trust’s budget for the latest quarter, with progress on efforts to secure the margin needed to cover core, as well as project, costs.
- 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.

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