

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **27 March 2025**
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 some key workstreams that have been underway since the report to the 10 of December 2024 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 In the short time I've now been in with the South Downs National Park Authority a lot of change has started to come our way. Devolution will see how we are governed shift, and it will present new challenges and opportunities for us as we seek to adapt to new structures. We're seeing reform to the planning system which looks to rebalance development, growth and nature recovery. A new Land Use Framework is now out for consultation that very clearly lays out the changes we're not only going to have to make in how we manage our land, but also on how we live and potentially what we eat. And the review of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan. As a backdrop to this we're experiencing geopolitical forces that will impact on how governments allocate resources.

2.2 The SDNPA will need to find its place in this. I think we're in a good position to adapt to these changes and lead where we have a clear mandate to do so. Our Partnership Management Plan and Local Plan Review are shaping up well and are extremely timely. But big challenges lie ahead too, not least to our funding in the future. Hence, we're choosing to lean into these with a strong focus on income diversification and partnership working. Both things that we are already good at.

2.3 I think you can see from the selection below that we're going great guns. Delivering strongly for nature, climate, people and place while planning for the future and engaging huge numbers of people as we do so. I'm so proud of our teams and the work they do. The people who work at the SDNPA and the partnerships they nurture are our greatest asset, and they will stand us in good stead for whatever comes next.

3. Planning

3.1 **Planning performance** remains stable over the past year to March 2025 and well above target level (indicated in brackets). 93% (60%) of major applications were determined in time and 89% (70%) of all other nationally monitored applications were determined in time. The appeals record remains good as well at 85% for the rolling year. We continue to monitor

appeal performance for any trends but there are none discernible now. Any trends would inform policy making.

- 3.2 The South Downs **Local Plan Review** is currently out for its first public consultation. This started on 20 January and runs for 8 weeks until 17 March. We have held or attended 20 events which were visited by over 1,000 people (members of the public, councillors and other stakeholders). The engagement and information received has been really helpful and combining events with the Partnership Management Plan has assisted in wider conversations that need to inform our spatial strategy. Recovering nature, farm diversification as well as housing growth, especially affordable homes, and of course allocations have been the main topics of conversation.
- 3.3 As of 6 March, we have received 876 comments – 60% via our online platform, 39% by email and 1% by letter. This consultation is the main opportunity for people to shape the final version of the Local Plan Review, so we are stepping up the communications, including a press release this week and more social media, to encourage everyone to get their responses in by the deadline.
- 3.4 Thus far in the financial year via **CIL** we have received £1.7m. Last year's final total was £1.9m so the figure is slightly down but in the same region. Relating to the above we usually see a slightly higher figure for a few years after a Local Plan has been adopted, as major sites get developed, and this can slow down as new sites are awaited through the review of the Local Plan.
- 3.5 Some really good projects have been carried out recently including £40K in CIL funding spent at Petersfield Rugby Club on their Green Energy Initiative project, providing renewable energy and reducing costs. The Egrets Way funding was used to complete a new 1.5km shared use path between Piddinghoe and Newhaven.
- 3.6 Western Sussex Rivers Trust have been active following a £25K CIL funding. In three phases they have restored 1010m of hedgerow on a hillside above the River Rother, linking a woodland to an existing hedgerow incorporating a line of mature oak trees; 750m of hedgerow comprising 4600 hedging trees, 75 Oaks and 19 Sussex Black Poplars at a site near Empshott and; Six scrapes and ponds have been created to interrupt overland flows as well as providing rich habitat.
- 3.7 Finally on CIL, Droxford Junior School have used their £38K award for a landscape strategy for learning and play. The aims were to provide new play and outdoor education facilities. The project has developed the outdoors site for learning and play. An outdoor classroom and amphitheatre, a new trim trail, low ropes and den building area, along with planting of pollinating plants are all in place. Droxford Junior School is also an ambassador school for the South Downs National Park, and they are instrumental in helping other schools engage with outdoor education by hosting a collaboration workshop which over 35 schools attended.
- 3.8 A fresh and more up to date **Technical Advice Note on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)** has been completed and signed off by the Chair of Planning this month. With input from across the organisation this version reflects lessons learned and new approaches to BNG. Most pleasing is to see the connections made between habitat and species, the extended guidance on linear habitats (watercourses and hedgerows) and greater clarity on securing and monitoring BNG. This all links well with our wider work on nature recovery.
- 3.9 Officers continue to assess the implications of the **Planning Reforms** and wider changes taking place. Responses to the myriads of changes proposed are overseen by the Planning Committee. We have sent a robust response to the Development and Nature Recovery Working paper, highlighting the importance of local delivery mechanisms working with landowners to secure nature along with growth. We highlighted the good work we are already doing that would be a model for the use of the Nature Restoration Fund - in effect a central Government pot of finance raised from developer contributions to secure nature enhancements. We continue to engage with Government officials and some MP's on how the reforms could affect National Parks and how we can assist thinking and delivery.

4. Progress of Existing Projects

- 4.1 As we enter Year 3 of the project, **Ouse Valley Climate Action (OVCA)** continues to achieve at pace. Alongside supporting the activities of individual community groups, the team have delivered 64 active travel events, 49 training sessions, 62 home energy visits and 1,500 energy-efficiency advice conversations so far this financial year, whilst moving to a clear focus on legacy planning for Year 3 and ensuring that, in line with OVCA's 'Asset-Based Community Development' (ABCD) approach, community projects and volunteers are left in as sustainable a position as possible when OVCA comes to an end. Our Income Generation team were successful in securing an additional £200,000 funding extension from the lottery for OVCA to enable an additional year 4 of resources to deliver on the legacy of OVCA.
- 4.2 **Centurion Way** - Section 2 - Southwest & Bridges (West Dean Estate) was completed in Q3, which involved the installation of a path and access ramp. The fencing has been delayed and is rescheduled for completion later in 2025. There is some additional landscaping and planting of hedging planned once this is completed. The final tasks will include the installation of signage and interpretation. The lower sections of the route are anticipated to be opened in the summer of 2025. Work was due to start on tree planting and felling along the Wellhanger Copse and Littlewood Farm section of the route, but this has now been delayed allowing time to consult with stakeholders on the overall approach to the proposed works.
- 4.3 **Downs to the Sea** received its Permission to Start from the National Lottery Heritage Fund on 20 December 2024, moving the project officially into the Delivery Phase.
- 4.4 Downs to the Sea will help carry out much-needed restoration work to several internationally designated wildlife sites, such as RSPB Pulborough Brooks and RSPB Pagham Harbour in West Sussex. The initiative will restore 15 ponds in the National Park to create biodiversity hotspots and support the movement of wildlife between sites, increasing resilience to a warmer and wetter climate. A range of activities are also planned to connect people with waterways, including volunteering to help rivers and social prescribing to tap into waters' benefits for health and wellbeing.
- 4.5 This year's Farming in Protected Landscapes (**FiPL**) programme budget of £1,025,749 has been fully allocated, and grant claims are now being processed. Projects have achieved a huge variety of FiPL programme outcomes (Climate, Nature, People and Place) and include several large-scale farm building restoration and diversifications projects. FiPL has now been extended for a further year ([Farming in Protected Landscapes programme extended until 2026 – Farming](#)) with the National Park's programme budget being £602,868.
- 4.6 The journey towards the declaration of the Seven Sisters National Nature Reserve or “**super NNR**” is still progressing. In January, the 8 core partners of the “super NNR” comprising of Natural England, National Trust, South East Water, Eastbourne Borough Council, Forestry England, Seaford Town Council, Sussex Wildlife Trust and the South Downs National Park Authority, hosted members of the Natural England national NNR Team on a site visit. A requirement of the declaration process.
- 4.7 The partnership has been forming over the last 18 months and the journey towards declaration involves the following steps:
- 21-January 2025 – national NNR Team site visit
 - 19-March 2025 – Natural England Estates Panel
 - May 2025 - Chief Operating Officer - Operations (replaces NExCo)
 - June 2025 - Declarations Committee (replaces NE Board)
 - September 2025 - Declaration
- 4.8 Nothing significant has happened since the site visit, but collaboration continues. The latest NNR map indicates that a total of 1542.21ha of land is proposed to be included within the NNR by the 8 core partners. This figure is still subject to slight change.

- 4.9 Local Nature Recovery Strategies (**LNRS**) are a requirement of the Environment Act 2021. The South Downs National Park will be covered by LNRS for Hampshire (HCC as the Responsible Authority) and Sussex (a pan-Sussex approach which will currently yield two strategies: West Sussex and East Sussex with Brighton & Hove). The SDNPA is a Supporting Authority in the production of LNRS. In this context the Responsible Authority must seek approval from all Supporting Authorities prior to consultation and publication. The NPA granted delegated authority for this back in December 2023 [Agenda-Item-8.pdf](#).
- 4.10 As required through the above delegation I can advise Members that the Hampshire LNRS is out to its Supporting Authority consultation from 31-March with the Public consultation expected in May (6 weeks). The timetable for the Sussex LNRS means that the Supporting Authority consultation is not expected until April/May.
- 4.11 As part of our ongoing programme of investment at **Seven Sisters Country Park**, the reed bed was replaced with a new sewage treatment plant and all work completed in December. This was partially funded by the Defra water grant, which also included several small projects including new sluice gate repairs, a new dew pond and meander regrading. Work also progressed on the New Barn Farmhouse with members approving additional contingency funding for renovation work to halt deterioration and preserve the asset, as well as enable basic living accommodation to be provided. The building is currently derelict and falling into decline. It has not been lived in for three years. The roof needs to be removed, and the walls stabilised to prevent further decline. The contracts for this work are due to be awarded imminently.
- 5. Corporate Update**
- 5.1 We have completed both phases of the engagement on the **Partnership Management Plan (PMP)** and are awaiting the final report which will include an evaluation of how well the previous PMP was delivered and provides evidence for how we can focus the plan more effectively going forward. The consultants also ran a session at the recent All Staff Event, and this has provided us with some rich feedback about what we should continue to do, do differently or start to do. This will be very helpful in framing the Corporate Plan we will produce later in the year. We engaged about 1,000 stakeholders and members of the public as part of developing the plan. This spread was over 30 different engagement events, which were in person and online and in different parts of the National Park. The programme of public and stakeholder engagement has also been supplemented by an online survey promoted at all the events.
- 5.2 Work has begun on developing the content for the new plan based on the evidence from the engagement and feedback from the PMP Steering Group, which is guiding the process. Key dates for the next few months are; draft plan to external consultants for environment assessment, sense checking the draft vision, outcomes and objectives at the P&R away day on the 22 April; developing the public facing consultation platform and producing a final draft for approval at the NPA meeting on 22 May. Public consultation will run from June to July, avoiding the school holiday period in August.
- 5.3 Since my last report significant developments have taken place in relation to **devolution and local government reorganisation in England**. At the time of the last Authority meeting, the English Devolution White Paper had not yet been published. However, since then a devolution revolution has been kick started. The government set out its plans in the White Paper on 16 December and has since published several consultations to inform its plans including ones on the holding of hybrid meetings, strengthening the standards and conduct framework at local authorities, and consultations for those areas accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme. This will have a significant impact on the local government landscape across the SDNP as both [Hampshire and the Solent](#), and [Sussex and Brighton](#) have been accepted onto the Priority Programme. This will mean elections to appoint a mayor for those areas in May 2026 with subsequent devolution of funding and decision making from Whitehall. The county and district councils in these areas are expected to be replaced by unitary authorities by May 2028, with those authorities set up in shadow form by May 2027.

- 5.4 For us, this is likely to have wide ranging impacts. The processes come with both risks and opportunities for us and many of these are reflected on our [Corporate Risk Register](#) which is monitored by the Policy & Resources Committee. To remain abreast of the rapid developments taking place in this area and to ensure that the National Park is considered in discussions and decisions on devolution and local government reorganisation, Vanessa Rowlands, Tim Slaney and I have been meeting with senior leaders across the local area and with central government; a number of other officers are also involved in their respective areas, particularly where there is likely to be significant change such as planning and governance.
- 5.5 By the date of this meeting, local councils will have submitted their interim proposals on local government reorganisation to the Government. We will continue to keep Members updated on news and developments as devolution and local government reorganisation progress.
- 5.6 **Finance and Facilities** - the two budget setting workshops held in December and January were well attended by board members. The board reviewed the revenue budget in some detail including the impact of changes to National Insurance, the pay award for 2025-26, non-pay inflation, investment income and how our spend tracks to the corporate plan. The SDNPA has now been given an indicative allocation from DEFRA for 25/26 which falls within our main planned scenario. This will involve capitalising some areas of our existing work and introducing new capital projects where we have received additional funding. This is presented within the budget paper. We now await the outcome of the current spending review which should give us a much welcome three year outlook from 26/27 to 28/29. I would not expect to get any detail on that until later in the year.
- 5.7 On 19 February we advertised a **Director of Business Development and Growth post**. This new post will lead the SDNPA in growing existing income generation and fundraising schemes and creating new and viable means of increasing overall revenue to the SDNPA to help the authority deliver more year on year and secure a sustainable model for the future.
- 5.8 The post will also lead the SDNPAs role in Local Government Reform, ensuring that we develop and maintain strong strategic and operational partnerships with new Authorities.
- 5.9 We are working again with Gatenby Sanderson Recruitment Agency who successfully supported us with the recruitment of the Chief Executive and Interim Director of Landscape and Strategy. They have worked with four of the UK National Parks over recent years and other statutory bodies such as Natural England, Forestry England and the Office for Environmental Protection. They therefore have a good understanding of the UK's National Parks and an appreciation of the challenges and opportunities they face.
- 5.10 The post closes on 19 March and preliminary interviews with Gatenby Sanderson will take place from 7 – 18 April. The final interviews and assessment process will take place at South Downs Centre on 28 April 25.
- 5.11 Three **farmers' meetings** were held across the National Park in February to help farmers, landowners and land managers navigate current situations in farming practice, policy and grant schemes. Presentation included; agri-environment and woodland grant scheme updates from Natural England and the Forestry Commission respectively, agri-environment scheme application hints & tips and soil health management. The key aim of the meetings was to help provide support towards maximising the delivery of schemes for both the farm business and environment. Over 75 farmers/landowners/land managers attended with overall feedback being extremely positive. With the assistance of local experts and advisors, the Farming Team now intend to organise further drop-in meetings and workshops to help address individual problems and concerns.
- 5.12 **Urgent action approval** - I would also like to report, in line with the Authority's Standing Orders, an urgent action decision that was taken, in consultation with Vanessa as Chair of the Authority, to approve the award of a contract for works at the former Singleton Station as part of the ongoing Centurion Way project. Centurion Way is a priority route within the National Park and our Corporate Plan. The works that were to be undertaken under this

contract were consolidation and repair works to facilitate the ongoing construction of Centurion Way. This is going to be a really exciting feature on the route.

6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 Our events season kicked off with a celebration of all things **Dark Skies**. Our dark skies engagement is a great way to not only engage people with our International Dark Skies Reserve status (1 of only 22 in the world) but also to talk about our nature recovery work and the importance of protecting dark skies for all of the creatures who depend on it. Historically, dark skies has been our best way to engage with audiences that we normally find harder to reach, and this year's Dark Skies Festival was no exception. We kicked off dark skies season with our astrophotography competition and started our in-person events by attending a dark skies event at the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard where we spoke to over 600 people. Events at SSCP, Alice Holt, Queen Elizabeth Country Park and Brighton seafront followed and in total, we engaged with nearly 1,500 people in person and reached over 273,000 people online, with over 11,500 engagements. A new element for this year's Festival was the launch of our 'Embrace the Darkness' podcast. With four episodes ranging on topics from the importance of darkness for health and wellbeing to nature connectedness at night, the podcasts feature great experts and have already had over 260 listens. You can find the podcasts through all the main podcast streaming services.
- 6.2 The in-person Dark Skies Festival also provided a great opportunity to engage people about the Partnership Management Plan.
- 6.3 It's been a very strong start to the year **media-wise**. To start 2025, the announcement of our annual photography competition gained over 200 pieces of coverage across the UK, including page four of The Times, BBC Online and broadcast reports on BBC South East and ITV Meridian.
- 6.4 Our Dark Skies coverage has reached more than 1bn people worldwide, with 180 pieces of coverage, focusing on the winners of our astrophotography competition, including The Metro, MSN, Yahoo, Daily Telegraph, Asian Image, I Paper, ITV, Edinburgh Evening News, Yorkshire Post and BBC Online, as well as a radio interview with BBC Sussex.
- 6.5 The launch of our Local Plan Review received strong local and regional pick-up, including a detailed and often challenging interview with Tim Slaney live on BBC Sussex that was handled brilliantly by our Planning Director. This was followed by further coverage in local outlets including the Hampshire Chronicle, Chichester Observer, Liphook Herald, Crawley Observer and a radio interview with community radio station Shine. Publicity for the consultation has been supported by further press releases; three newsletter pushes and social media.
- 6.6 Meanwhile, the Authority's newsletter continues to grow steadily, with over 500 new subscribers from our Christmas Advent Calendar and bringing the readership to over 13,000 people, as well as parishes, local MPs, local authorities inside and on the border of the National Park, and partners.
- 6.7 It's been turbulent time on **digital platforms**, but we continue to perform strongly, with growing followers and engagement. Our fledgling Bluesky channel gained 559 new followers in February alone and we now have over 2,200 followers. In total across our social channels, we now have over 111,000 followers and engagement continues to grow. For example, while Threads remains our weaker channel for growth, content views rose from 10,000 to 17,000 between January and February and interactions grew by more than 50%
- 6.8 The Dark Skies Festival caused a significant increase in the visits to our website, with 40,000 more website sessions in February than in January. Our Hub pages have also seen an increase in visits over this quarter. What is most significant is that for this quarter, the largest cohort of visitors to our website was 25-34 years of age.
- 6.9 Instagram remains our strongest social media channel, and we have been trying new types of posts. In February alone we gained over 1,500 new followers, driven, we believe by the new style content and dark skies. This month saw us pass a huge milestone – 1.3m views on a single reel!

6.10 After months of losing followers as people left X in droves, we have again begun to gain new followers. This is largely driven by Good Omens fans – a TV show that referred to the South Downs. We have been actively engaging with this audience, and they continue to grow. We have now been invited to speak to a meet up in London on Good Omens. So, strong performance continues with an average weekly content reach/view being 496,536 for February and a strong engagement rate across channels of 7.96%.

7. Conclusion

7.1 As with previous reports, the aim has been to provide a necessary snapshot of some of the highlights of the period since the report to the 10 of December 2024 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail, or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Director of Landscape and Strategy; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	N/A

