

Report to **South Downs National Park**  
Date **22 May 2025**  
By **Performance and Projects Manager**  
Title of Report **South Downs Partnership Management Plan 2026-2031 and Vision 2060 – draft for public consultation**

## **Decision**

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**Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to:**

- 1. Approve the draft Vision 2060 for the National Park, as set out at Appendix I, for consultation as part of the consultation on the draft Partnership Management Plan.**
  - 2. Approve the draft Partnership Management Plan 2026-31, as set out at Appendix I, for consultation.**
  - 3. Note the timeline as set out in paragraph 3.18.**
  - 4. Delegate to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make any changes to the draft vision or draft Partnership Management Plan arising from comments at the NPA meeting and any other minor and presentational changes to the document for the consultation.**
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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1.** The purpose of this report is to seek approval of the consultation pack which includes the draft vision for the National Park and the draft Partnership Management Plan (PMP).
- 1.2.** The Authority's approach to the review of the PMP for 2026-2031 is informed by an evaluation of the 2020-2025 plan, and a review of the evidence base in the State of the Park Report. In addition, in April 2024 Natural England produced draft guidance for Protected Landscapes in England. It sets out in some detail how National Park management plan reviews should be conducted.
- 1.3.** The NPA approved the approach to the review of the PMP at its meeting on 17 October 2024 (Report NPA24/25-15). This included:
  - Use of consultants to engage with stakeholders as part of developing a revised PMP. The other report on this agenda sets out in more detail the process and findings from the engagement programme.
  - A Steering Group of external stakeholders with specific Terms of Reference to oversee the process and recommend revisions of the PMP for the NPA to approve; as well as to agree and recommend a framework for monitoring. The Group concludes its work no later than the end of December 2025.
  - Agreement to publish a revised PMP rather than a scoping report and a list of revisions to the existing PMP. Also, for the Chief Executive to issue the notice to Natural England of the intention to review the PMP as required under Section 66 of the Environment Act 1995.

- 1.4. One of the reports required is the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The assessment is required under the European Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, known as the Strategic Environmental Assessment or SEA Directive. The other reports are Habitat Regulation Assessment (HRA), Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) and a Health Impact Assessments. These are combined into an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA). The IIA is at Appendix 2.
- 1.5. AECOM were engaged to undertake the various assessments required as part of the review of the PMP as detailed in the paragraph below. Their initial scoping report has been produced and was sent by AECOM to statutory consultees as required by this process. Responses to the scoping report were received from Natural England and Historic England. Feedback from Historic England was that the scoping report adequately covered the issues that may arise in respect of the potential effects of development sites on heritage assets.
- 1.6. Feedback from Natural England was more detailed. They welcomed the overarching sustainability themes and issues identified within the report, as they cover most of the natural environment issues and areas within their remit. They identified further sustainability issues (constraints and/or objectives) within each theme that should be considered within the IIA or given added clarity. AECOM advised that the comments raised no serious concerns are addressed in the Environmental Report. Table 31 in the attached appendix sets out in detail the comments from Historic England and Natural England.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 ('the 1949 Act') enabled the creation of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (now known as National Landscapes), ensuring the protection of the Country's most beautiful and unique landscapes.
- 2.2. National Park Authorities are the responsible Authority for their area. The statutory purposes and duty for National Parks, as set out in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife, and cultural heritage of their areas and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public. The duty is to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities in the National Park in pursuit of the purposes.
- 2.3. The Management Plan is the single most important policy document for a National Park Authority. It is a plan for the geographic area of the designation not for a single authority or body. As a strategic over-arching document, it is intended to coordinate and integrate other policies, plans and strategies as a partnership endeavour across a number of organisations, where these relate to the purposes and duties. The Management Plan is the principal vehicle for ensuring that the statutory purposes of the National Park are met.
- 2.4. Under Section 66 of the Environment Act 1995, National Park Authorities are required to review their Management Plans at intervals of not more than five years. The review determines whether it would be expedient to amend the Plan and what (if any) amendments would be appropriate, to make any amendments that are considered appropriate, and to publish a report on the review setting out amendments made. An alternative is to publish a revised draft plan.
- 2.5. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA) section 245, has amended the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, such that relevant authorities in respect of their actions, decisions and operations 'must seek to further' the statutory purposes of National Parks (known as the S245 duty).
- 2.6. The consultation draft PMP also takes account of targets set out in the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework.
- 2.7. [The Environmental Improvement Plan](#) (EIP), published in January 2023 is the first five-year refresh of the government's 25-Year Environment Plan. It is one of the core drivers of a Management Plan. As required by Natural England's draft management plan guidance a

management plan is required to incorporate key strategies and processes which transpose the EIP into action.

### 3. Issues for consideration

#### How the Plan was developed

- 3.1. The development of a revised PMP started in 2024, with initial meetings of staff and Members and the introduction of the Steering Group to oversee and support the process. The engagement Programme started in December 2024 and finished in March 2025. The report of the engagement programme is Appendix 2 to agenda item 6 of this meeting. The State of the Park report, and evidence base have been reviewed along with delivery of the 2020-25 PMP. Natural England Guidance although draft has also informed the form and language of the plan and the approach to engagement.
- 3.2. The findings and recommendations from the engagement programme are detailed in the report at agenda item 6 of this meeting and have been reflected in the supporting text and framing of the aims and objectives in the draft PMP.
- 3.3. Internal experts led by the Communications and Engagement Manager, considered the evidence and findings from the engagement and collaborated to develop a set of 7 aims and 15 objectives. They also provided content for the accompanying text, which was edited to ensure a consistent voice.
- 3.4. The Steering Group met on 1 May 2025 to consider the engagement report and the draft PMP. They provided some very thoughtful feedback on the vision, suggesting it could be clearer in welcoming new visitors, as current language may imply exclusivity. Recognizing farming and heritage would strengthen engagement, while refining climate change messaging and shifting toward land management terminology could improve clarity. Additionally, the park's role in public health and wellbeing should be more explicitly addressed. It wasn't possible to include all of the suggestions and keep a succinct and inspiring vision, but a good compromise has been struck, conveying a sense of welcome and belonging for everyone and shifting the language around climate adaptation.
- 3.5. The Steering Group also discussed the draft aims and objectives. A summary of their discussion is listed below:
  - **Environmental Management:** The focus should be to improve priority wildlife sites rather than just maintain them. Farming must balance the need for productivity with sustainable land stewardship. It would be helpful to clarify water-related deliverables.
  - **Visitor Experience & Accessibility:** The plan should address barriers to countryside access, ensuring both physical accessibility and enabling a welcoming atmosphere. Public transport improvements should be included.
  - **Stakeholder Commitment:** The process needs to secure partner support and establish measurable targets to enhance credibility. Language should reflect collective responsibility beyond the National Park Authority.
  - **Education & Inclusivity:** Strengthen links with higher education and ensure paid work experience for disadvantaged participants. The park must foster a safe and inclusive environment for all visitors.
  - **Strategic Planning:** Define stakeholder roles, anticipate challenges, outline statutory requirements, and. Early engagement should leverage protection and designation measures.
- 3.6. Their comments have informed the draft PMP at **Appendix I**. The Steering Group were happy to agree that with the suggested changes, if the objectives are achieved, they will help to deliver the vision and for the draft PMP to be recommended to the NPA.
- 3.7. The draft Natural England Guidance sets out that the PMP should be accompanied by a delivery plan. It sets out what the partners to the plan are likely to deliver towards the targets over the next 5 years. We plan to engage with partners over the summer to seek

their input into the delivery plan. This is expected to be a live document and which would evolve and change over time.

- 3.8. The PMP sets out drivers for change which are similar but have changed from the last PMP, mainly due to economic and technological changes and the impact of devolution and local government reorganisation in both Sussex and Hampshire. This along with the outcomes from the engagement programme, sets the context for the revised focus of the plan.
- 3.9. The plan is split into two themes, Nature and Climate and People and Place. The revised PMP has 7 aims and 15 objectives. This is a reduction from 10 and 21 respectively. These are an evolution of the previous plan and provide more focus in certain areas. The plan recognises of the key role played by land managers, farmers, foresters and landowners in shaping the environment and being able to work at landscape scale. Water is also included with its own aim and objectives. The focus for learning is shifted to creating future custodians and is focused specifically on young people. Access has been changed to include welcome. Both nature and climate aims are developed from the previous PMP.
- 3.10. The PMP includes clear targets for delivery, set out under each set of aims and activities. It also includes principles which act as guidance for partners delivering towards the targets. They are set out by how they relate to each aim. There are 16 principles that relate to planning and 7 general principles.

#### Integrated Impact assessment and Reasonable alternatives

- 3.11. The evaluation of 'reasonable alternatives' is a key part of the IIA process to ensure compliance with the SEA Regulations. While the SEA Regulations do not define what qualifies as a reasonable alternative, the IIA assessment should concentrate on the key choices within the PMP, whilst also acknowledging its broad scope as a strategic-level plan. The consultants have identified a few specific areas where considering reasonable alternatives within the IIA process may add value. These alternatives will be explored during the consultation phase.
- 3.12. The conclusions of the IIA report are that "The objectives and associated actions within the PMP are expected to lead to **significant, direct, long-term, beneficial effects across most IIA themes**, including Climate Change, Communities and Health, Employment and Economy, Equalities and Inclusion, Historic and Cultural Heritage, Housing, Protection and Sustainable Use of Resources, and Transport".
- 3.13. It further states that "**Moderate, medium-term benefits** are expected for Design Standards, while **mixed effects** are anticipated for Biodiversity and Nature Recovery and Landscape, with both beneficial outcomes (conservation and engagement) and some very limited potential adverse impacts (environmental degradation and new infrastructure)".
- 3.14. The IIA anticipates "**No significant adverse effects** are considered likely in implementation of the PMP".
- 3.15. The IIA puts forward the following recommendations for consideration by plan makers to inform policy development: "Objective 1.1 may be strengthened by referencing the National Park's Special Qualities, to ensure that the conservation of these qualities is directly linked to habitat and nature management. For example, the objective could be reworded to: "To improve, expand, connect and increase the resilience of wildlife-rich habitats and land managed for nature, **in ways that conserve and enhance the National Park's Special Qualities**, ensuring we are on track to reach 60% managed for nature by 2060".
- 3.16. "Objective 5.1 may be strengthened with a greater emphasis on impact management, helping to balance accessibility with the protection of the National Park's most sensitive features. For example, the objective could be reworded to: "To improve the accessibility of the National Park to enable everyone to actively travel and connect with nature, while managing visitor pressure to protect sensitive habitats and landscapes"".

#### Vision

- 3.17. As part of the process for reviewing the PMP the opportunity has been taken to look again at the long-term vision. This was agreed several years ago and reached to 2050. It is

proposed to extend the length of the vision to 2026 to be a long enough timescale to support the Local Plan. It has also been reframed to be more succinct and inspiring than the current vision which is much longer and complex. Members are asked to approve the Vision to be part of the consultation draft of the PMP.

#### Timescale

- 3.18. After approval the public consultation will be launched on 02 June and finish on 25 July. Other key dates are set out below:

- **Discussions with partners:** to gain buy in and support June – July 2025
- **Analysis of responses:** Late August to mid-September 2025.
- **Steering Group meeting:** End of September 2025 to review consultation responses and propose changes.
- **Revised draft plan:**
  - Presented to a **workshop for Members** in October 2025.
  - Reviewed by the **Steering Group** on 04 November 2025.
- **Integrated assessments:** Conducted by environmental consultants during September and October 2025.
- **Policy and Resources Committee:** Considers the draft plan for recommendation to the NPA in November 2025.
- **Review completion:** December 2025, with final PMP approval sought at the NPA meeting.
- **Plan launch:** Early 2026.

#### **4. Options & cost implications**

- 4.1. The Authority has £75,000 allocated to the PMP review (£35k agreed in March 2024 and £40k agreed in July 2024) for work required during this financial year. This budget will fund the two contracts let to support the review. £50,000 was allocated in the 2025-26 budget to support the production of the PMP.
- 4.2. A significant amount of staff resource has been and will continue to be allocated to developing the PMP. Management and co-ordination of 5 days a week is split between the Performance and Projects Manager and the Performance and Learning Officer. Strategy Leads are likely to need to spend 1 a day a week over the summer to support engagement with partners in gaining pledges for delivery. There will be a concentrated period for Strategy Leads and other staff in September to support the revisions to the plan. There will also be a call on the time of staff across the Authority including Lead Rangers, Countryside and Policy Managers and members of the Senior Leadership Team. The Communications and Engagement Manager is leading on the drafting and revisions to the plan working with our experts. Resource will also be needed from the Planning Directorate to align the PMP and South Downs Local Plan.

#### **5. Next steps**

- 5.1. Following this meeting the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, will make any changes requested by Members to the draft Vision and PMP before they go out for consultation. The Chief Executive will make the relevant notification to Natural England of the intention of the SDNPA to review the PMP for the South Downs National Park. The consultation will be launched on 2 June and finish on 25 July. Following analysis of the responses suggested changes to the plan will be drafted and presented to a workshop for Members in October and to the Steering group on 4 November.

#### **6. Other implications**

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	The aim is for the final revised PMP to be considered at the NPA meeting in December 2025.
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	The financial resource implications are covered in section 4 above. A significant amount of staff time will be needed to manage the review and to participate in developing revised outcomes and actions for a delivery plan. Relevant staff have this in their PDRs for this year.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	Procurement processes for the consultants engaged have been carried out using Most Economically Advantageous Tender methodology with the aim of obtaining the best possible value for money through that process.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	The review of the PMP will result in a new 5-year PMP with new outcomes, from which a new 5-year Corporate Plan will also flow. The PMP is vital to the SDNPA delivering on the purposes of the National Park.
Links to other projects or partner organisations	The review of the PMP is fundamentally a partnership exercise and the revised plan will be a shared set of ambitions, outcomes and an agreed delivery plan with measurable targets agreed with partners.
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	The PMP will be one of the main strategic mechanisms to support action for climate change mitigation and adaptation. It will incorporate the climate change action plan we already have.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	None
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	<p>An intrinsic part of the process is the carrying out of an equalities impact assessment which has been assessed.</p> <p>Specific benefits are listed below:</p> <p><b>Support for young people</b> (Objectives 4.1 &amp; 4.2): Reduces barriers for underrepresented groups, including those from low-income backgrounds and rural communities, by offering youth programmes and work experience opportunities that build skills and confidence.</p> <p><b>Improved travel and access</b> (Objectives 5.1 &amp; 5.2): Enhances accessibility for disabled people, older adults, and those without private transport through better active travel routes and inclusive infrastructure.</p> <p><b>Inclusive visitor experience</b>: Raises awareness of the National Park's International Dark Sky Reserve status, fostering a more welcoming environment for diverse visitors.</p> <p><b>Affordable, accessible housing</b> (Objective 7.2): Supports housing affordability for young people, disabled residents, seasonal workers, and lower-income households, preventing displacement and promoting local community sustainability.</p>

Implication	Yes*/No
	<b>Integrated accessibility in housing:</b> Ensures new housing designs consider accessibility, strengthening equalities and inclusion within the National Park.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	The Engagement consultants were required to ensure that all staff working with vulnerable people were DBS checked, and they are required to familiarise themselves with and adhere to the SDNPA safeguarding policy.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	It is likely that some data relating to partners will need to be collected to allow engagement to take place. We will ensure that all data protection principles are followed when dealing with personal data. Provisions on data protection for consultants are a standard part of the procurement process.

## 7. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Lack of buy in from partners	4	4	<p>Huge efforts went into developing an approach which is inclusive and inspiring for partners. Section 245 of the LURA introduced a requirement for some organisations to seek to further SDNPA purposes and duty and participation in the PMP process goes some way to demonstrating that.</p> <p>Engagement over the summer will seek specific buy-in from partners both for the PMP and for pledges to support achieving the targets.</p> <p>The Steering Group has been providing some support from external partners. It is intended that at the end of the review the group is expanded and continues to engage with the PMP and help keep the delivery plan under review.</p>
Significant change in Government guidance or policy	3	3	<p>Developing an understanding of government policy and drivers for change which is integrated into the process will help mitigate this risk but if things fundamentally change then the plan review may need to be put on hold or completed in a different way.</p>

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Devolution prevents delivery of some of the priorities in the PMP	5	4	The new post of Director of Growth and Business Development is specifically tasked with ensuring the SDNPA is represented in the process of devolution. This will enable the Authority to ensure that the National Park and its aims are considered as part of the devolution deal.

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Appendices	1. Draft Partnership Management Plan 2026-31 report 2. Integrated Impact Assessment report
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services,
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	<a href="#">Report to NPA meeting 17 October 2024</a> <a href="#">Report to Policy &amp; Resources Committee</a> <a href="#">Appendices</a> <a href="#">National Paks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949</a> <a href="#">Environment Act 1995</a> <a href="#">Natural Environment and Communities (NERC) Act 2006</a> <a href="#">UK Environmental-improvement-plan</a> Natural England Draft Management Plan Guidance for Protected Landscapes in England Planning the journey to a visionary future; a review of the South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan development process. Heritage Insider - September 2020