

**Agenda Item 10**  
**Report NPA25/26-02**

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**  
Date **8 July 2025**  
By **Chief Executive Officer**  
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**  
**Note**

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**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.**

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**1. Summary and Background**

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of some key workstreams that have been underway since the report to the 27 of March 2025 NPA.

**2. Introduction**

- 2.1 To mark the passing of my first six months in the role I'd like to shift the emphasis a bit of the CEO report to bring to the fore our performance against key targets and indicators within the corporate plan. This is part of a journey that all protected landscapes are on which is driven by the introduction by DEFRA of the new Protected Landscapes Target and Outcomes Framework. This is a common set of indicators that all Protected Landscapes need to report against to DEFRA in order to account for the core grant. This is a very useful thing to be able to do when trying to make the case for more funding. It aligns with new guidance for developing Partnership Management Plans, which we have drawn on when developing our new PMP.
- 2.2 Below, I have drawn on our current annual review of last year's corporate plan. But in the future, I will report against the core aims of our new PMP (once finalised) and how we contribute to those through our own projects and programmes. This is intended to keep me, and the NPA, focussed on our priorities, and will hopefully make it easier for the board to see how we are performing against them. I want to recognise here the amazing work that has gone into producing the PMP consultation draft by the whole team. And I'd like to thank members for all your engagement and support throughout.
- 2.3 In General Updates I cover key elements of our work that the performance reporting misses. This quarter I'm focussing on:
- Planning. This is such a key function for us and an area where we are seeing a lot of change, both nationally and in how we are trying to make planning work even harder for us on nature recovery and climate action. It's fantastic to see high standards being upheld here as well as the policy work that is going on, not to mention the incredible work around the Local Plan Review.
  - Devolution and Local Government Reform. This is also moving at pace and will impact us significantly as well as providing us with new and exciting opportunities. It's great

to have James Winkworth join SLT to lead on this work alongside developing our income generation workstreams.

- Media and Communications. I feel it's important to share with you all the things we are doing to engage the public, support our projects and programmes and inspire more and more people to get behind what we are doing. There's some really fantastic work going on here. A special thanks for the support on the PMP and LPR.
- HR and Recruitment. We're nothing without our fantastic teams. We've seen some change at SLT level (with more to come) as well as across the organisation but we've also been working on improving the offer to employees to make the SDNPA an even better place to work! The HR team really keeps the machine running and makes sure we have the best possible people, well supported, in place to deliver our goals. It's been a busy time, so I want to recognise the great work they do and the brilliant advice they provide.
- Governance. Always keeping us honest and providing me and members with expert guidance, the Governance team play an essential role in supporting our work. I feel it's useful to use this report to take stock of any changes that affect us. With devolution and local government reform, this is set to continue to be a busy team.

2.4 I've not mentioned it in the main body of the report but want to highlight here the amazing work that Vicky Turner and Craig Garoghan and their teams have done in getting us through year end and ensuring that we got substantial assurance audits, not to mention keeping our estate running and managing all our procurement and contracts!

2.5 The next few months will continue to be busy for all of us. The Comprehensive Spending Review has given DEFRA a relatively flat cash settlement. We will of course only find out what this means for us once they have been through their own Business Planning, but it's a good start. We are also expecting changes in the offer to farmers, which will in turn affect how we work with them. And the new Planning and Infrastructure Bill could have some profound implications for our Nature Based Solutions work, so we will continue to engage closely with both of those.



2.6 From a personal perspective, I am beginning to see the road ahead open up and stretch out through the work we are doing on the PMP and the LPR and as we see new priorities emerge from this new Government. I remain excited about the opportunities ahead and confident in our ability to engage with them positively.

2.7 As always, I want to thank members for their continued support for innovation, collaboration and ambition through their constructive challenge and contributions.

2.8 I hope you find this new format helpful. It will evolve as the PMP is finalised and in response to any feedback you might have.

### **3. Progress against the Corporate Plan**

#### Nature Recovery

KPI	Total to date (2022-25)	Annual 2024/25 Target	Actual achieved 2025/25	RAG Status
HLT1: To secure an additional 13,000ha, or 33% of land managed for nature by 2030 from a baseline of 25%.	6,766ha*	1,300 ha	491 ha	
HLT2: Work to maintain, enhance and/or restore 30% of existing Core Nature sites and support key species recovery within the SDNP by 2030.	Data for this target is now reported via the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) which analyses changes in the extent and condition of priority and wildlife-rich habitat. Data for 2024-25 is awaited and this KPI will be reported on using case studies.			
HLT3: To prepare for and implement Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)	N/A	Relevant applications to achieve 10% BNG increase from the pre-development biodiversity value	33.50%	

\*Please note that all hectares are estimated and these calculations are based on best-available data

### 3.1 HLT#1: To secure an additional 13,000ha, or 33% of land managed for nature by 2030 from a baseline of 25%.


At the end of Q4, a total of **6,766** additional hectares of land have been secured or managed for nature since 2022. This is **52% of the 13,000 hectares target** to be achieved by 2030. The RAG rating has been assessed as 'amber' for this latest quarter, reflecting the measured approach to delivery in 2024/25.

3.2 Good progress is being made at Seven Sisters Country Park under the new Countryside Stewardship agreement, however, more widely across the National Park, protected sites still need attention to bring them into favourable condition. Nature recovery hectares reported are lower than preceding years, nevertheless significant projects and schemes are being developed in the project pipeline which should result in successful continued delivery towards the 13,000ha target in future years.

### 3.3 HLT#3: To prepare for and implement Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

BNG was consistently delivered above the 10% requirement. Examples of enhancements most typically provided were wildflower planting, grassland management and tree and hedgerow planting and enhancements. The planning applications during this reporting period were generally larger or more complex sites with ecologists already involved in the project, while smaller-scale developments within the National Park opting for general biodiversity enhancements instead.

## Climate Action

KPI	Year	KPI Target (yrs 4-5)	SDNPA (Tonnes CO2)	Change on previous year (Tonnes)	RAG Status
H4.1 Total annual SDNPA carbon emissions	2024/25	-150 tonnes (CO2) on previous year	435.19*	<b>156.98</b>	
	2023/24		278.21	<b>-4.8</b>	
	2022/23		283.01	<b>16.44</b>	
	2021/22	Original Baseline (not including work at SSCP)	<b>266.57</b>		

### 3.4 HLT#4: South Downs National Park Authority to reduce its carbon footprint by 150 tonnes per annum in line with the 2030 net zero target

Data between 2021-2024 was measured through analysis of SDNPA Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions (direct and indirect e.g. from sources on site/our own vehicles, and from utilities



providing energy etc) . However, data for 2024/2025 also includes scope 3 emissions (from supply chain or services provided to it) and, as a result, the SDNPA emissions for this latest year are recorded as being much higher.

- 3.5 Decarbonisation efforts have already begun with the addition of a new all-electric lease vehicle to SDNPA's vehicle fleet. Data from Q4 shows a shift in transportation patterns, with Business Mileage decreasing by nearly 3,000 miles, while SDNPA fleet usage has increased by almost 4,000 miles.
- 3.6 An upstream emissions assessment has been commissioned using purchase data and physical consumption data for 2024-2025. This assessment will highlight areas where data quality could be improved, key hotspots for carbon management and areas to target for improvement. This analysis is due in July 2025.
- 3.7 **HLT#5: 5% reduction per annum in the overall carbon footprint of the South Downs National Park from the baseline reported in 2019**

KPI	Annual 2024/25 Target	Actual achieved 2025/25	RAG Status
H5.1 Total annual reduction in CO2 reported year on year in annual LULUCF Forestry component data in tonnes	5% reduction (tonnes CO2) *	Due July 2025	TBC

- 3.8 SDNPA has made significant progress in its Climate Change Programme this year, both through direct initiatives and community-supported projects. Over 4,000 children from 16 primary and secondary schools are learning about climate change through PeCAN's climate conference workshops and there have been 484 visits and 219 contributions to new Knowledge Hub Network (set up by SDNPA) for Community Climate Action in first 6 months.
- 3.9 The annual greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory data is due in July 2025 and will be reported in Q2 2025-26. We will be using this to update the carbon tracker we developed to monitor progress towards our emission reduction targets. There is a data lag in reporting against this measure as the data is only issued on an annual basis.





#### **A National Park for All**

KPI	Annual 2024/25 Target	Actual achieved 2025/25	RAG Status
H6.1 Number of people from underrepresented audiences engaged through engagement & project activities	100	7001	
H6.2 Number of engagement activities targeted at underrepresented audiences	30	317	

- 3.10 **HLT#6: Increase diversity of those engaging with the South Downs National Park**


In 2024-25, a wide-ranging programme of events and activities has engaged over 7000 people from underrepresented groups, with the National Park. Highlights have included the Dark Night Skies Festival which reached over 2000 people and funding from Generation Green 2 enabled 120 young people from 5 groups to experience the wonders of the South Downs at night.

- 3.11 As a result of the strong performance towards this target, it has been increased for 2025/26.

KPI	Annual 2024/25 Target	Actual achieved 2025/25	RAG Status
H7.1 Number of sessions facilitated by mobility equipment*	100 per year	137	
H7.2 Metres of new and/or improved accessible path	N/A	7815	
H7.3 Number of visits to the digital Accessibility Hub	5,000	8069	
H7.4 Number of page views of the Seven Sisters Country Park Accessibility Guide	N/A	4789	

**3.12 HLT#7: Work to make sure the landscape, scenery and tranquillity of SDNP is available to everyone, no matter what their access needs are.**

This year, SSCP have had 137 bookings for the mobility scooters at Seven Sisters Country Park, achieving our target. Bookings were down 9% on the previous year, this could be attributed to poor weather at usually popular times. Over 7 km of new and/or accessible path has been delivered through projects and by the Access Team – helping to make the South Downs more accessible.

KPI	Annual 2024/25 Target	Actual achieved 2025/25	RAG Status
HLT8: Digitally engage 100,000 people per year with the SDNP	100,000	154,704	

**3.13 HLT#8: Digitally engage 100,000 people per year with the SDNP**

The SDNPA's social media following has grown to over 115,000 thanks to digital campaigns targeting younger and underrepresented audiences, including YouTube Shorts, podcast series, and TikTok-style content. Visitor hubs also met their annual targets despite slight drops influenced by seasonal factors.

**4. General Updates**

Planning

- 4.1 **Planning performance** remains strong and exceeds government set targets. In June 2025 a report was provided to the Policy & Resources Committee which outlined the performance statistics over the 2024 – 2025 financial year and key achievements. The Planning Directorate (including our host authorities) processed just over 4,800 applications and the Planning Authority remains one of the largest in the country both in size and the applications processed. The speed of decision making is also high, with 90% of all applications being made within agreed timeframes. Appeal performance remains strong, with 84% of appeals being dismissed. In the year to date, there have been a higher than usual number of allowed appeals and this is being monitored by the Planning team, it is however expected to level out over the remainder of the year.
- 4.2 Our Enforcement teams across the Park are also processing investigations, with 518 cases closed this year. There have been some very high profile enforcement investigations in the local and national press and the Planning team have been working closely with host authorities to ensure that procedures and court action are delivered swiftly.
- 4.3 The planning team worked closely with partners on our response to the Rampion 2 Wind Farm Project, which was a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project. Whilst the Secretary of State ultimately approved the application, we were able to secure an enhanced package of

mitigation and £3.5 million of funding which will be put to use to compensate for the development impacts and fund nature-based, access and cultural heritage projects across the Park.

- 4.4 The delivery of affordable housing developments remains a key priority, and a large site in Pells Place, Lewes for 32 affordable homes is well under-way to provide local housing, which is net zero both in construction and operation, all whilst creating a high quality space for residents.
- 4.5 CIL funding has been provided for a number of exciting projects, including £50,000 to Buriton Village Hall to improve energy efficiency measures including solar PV installation. 2 fast-charge EV charging facilities will also be provided. Now that the 'CIL collection year' is over, we have approx. £1.77 million for projects across the Park and this will be allocated by workshops and Planning Committee in September 2025. We usually see an increase in the amount of CIL received following a Local Plan adoption, so we expect this figure to increase after the Local Plan Review has been adopted.
- 4.6 **The South Downs Local Plan Review** went out for its first public consultation earlier this year and we are now working through the responses and considering what changes are needed to the next version of the Plan. A report is going to Planning Committee this week which includes summaries of the consultation responses and proposals for additional work to be undertaken. Headlines are:
  - 1,900 individuals, groups & organisations responded, including 50 parish councils
  - 3,714 comments were made, 40% on policies and 57% on sites
  - On strategic issues people wanted us to prioritise environmental & landscape protection with nature recovery and climate action; but there was also a view that insufficient housing was proposed, leading to excessive pressure on areas immediately outside of SDNP, and the danger of stagnating towns / villages within SDNP.
  - The most commented on sites were Land East of Lodge Lane, Hassocks; East Street Farm, Amberley and Land West of Village Hall, Rogate; with key themes being: environment, biodiversity & landscape impact; strain on local services & infrastructure; traffic, transport, parking & pedestrian safety; and the need for exceptional benefits to justify boundary sites.
- 4.7 The report to Planning Committee also includes a proposal to amend the timetable for the Local Plan Review to take account of the rapidly evolving national policy landscape, the additional work needed and to allow time for Members to consider the shape of the final Plan to be submitted for examination. The revised timetable would see the next version of the Plan being published after the May 2026 mayoral elections and then submitted for examination in Autumn 2026 under the current plan-making system.
- 4.8 We are progressing our '**Planning for Nature**' work, which is looking at how we might make planning work better for nature recovery within the Park. This is very much in line with the renewed emphasis in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and building on Biodiversity Net Gain and Nutrient Neutrality. We want growth in development to go hand in hand with growth in nature.
- 4.9 We are also considering our part in the national picture and how the national Planning and Conservation groups can work more closely together, and what we can do as a group to make nature recovery easier, monitorable, and robust for the future.
- 4.10 Areas we are looking at include changes to permitted development rights for nature, the role of whole estate plans across the organisation, commercial opportunities, communication and single points of contact to enable better customer service. Examples include making it easier to provide ponds and water features without the need for planning permission, improvements to WEP's so all are clear what can be expected and probing further commercial opportunities.

### Devolution and Local Government Reform

- 4.11 **Devolution** continues at pace, and we are increasingly involved in key conversations that will shape how the South Downs—and protected landscapes more broadly—feature in the future governance of our region. Over recent months, we’ve started constructive dialogue with local authorities across Hampshire and Sussex, and it’s clear that National Parks are being seen not just as important environmental partners, but as credible players in strategic planning and service delivery.
- 4.12 In Hampshire, we are working closely with the New Forest National Park to coordinate our input into the evolving devolution agenda. Our immediate focus is on the eight emerging “Policy Workstreams”, including strategic Planning and Environment & Climate Change. Hampshire is in a unique position, with two—potentially three—submissions to Government expected. Given this complex environment, we are pursuing a united front from protected landscapes, to ensure we provide a consistent message and position ourselves as practical and valuable partners.
- 4.13 To that end, we are aligning our key asks with colleagues at New Forest. These include:
- Formal representation for protected landscapes within any new Strategic Authority.
  - Stronger integration into emerging Spatial Development Strategies.
  - A proactive role in Local Government Reorganisation, particularly around green infrastructure delivery.
- 4.14 Encouragingly, some early discussions have already begun on the potential for National Parks to take on a greater role in green service delivery functions within reformed local government structures. These priorities are being developed collaboratively, and we’ll soon be bringing in the wider family of Hampshire’s protected landscapes to ensure we’re speaking with a coherent and influential voice.
- 4.15 In Sussex, discussions are centring on the creation of new Strategic Authorities (formerly Combined Mayoral Authorities). A stakeholder group has been set up, involving Brighton & Hove City Council, West Sussex and East Sussex County Councils. We’re pleased to report that the South Downs National Park Authority has been invited to participate as a key stakeholder, representing protected landscapes. This is a positive sign of recognition—both for our role in the community and our potential to contribute to wider strategic outcomes. We are treating this responsibility with the seriousness it deserves. We are already setting up meetings with other Sussex-based protected landscapes to align our priorities and ensure we speak as one. This Sussex work will naturally be informed by our approach in Hampshire, creating a consistent and credible voice across both counties.
- 4.16 At the national level, we have been advocating directly with Government. This includes:
- Speaking with the Chief Planner about ensuring National Parks are fully represented within Spatial Development Strategies.
  - Engaging with DEFRA on the importance of the Power of Competence, which we believe is vital to ensuring National Parks have the flexibility to play a meaningful role in devolution arrangements.
- 4.17 Internally, we’ve also launched a cross-organisational staff group to undertake a more detailed assessment of the opportunities and risks that devolution and local government reform might bring to the South Downs. This will help us remain agile, informed, and ready to contribute constructively as the picture becomes clearer.

### Media and Communications

- 4.18 The highlight of our summer engagement is our annual **ReNature Festival** (22-28 June). The festival gives us a chance to bring our ReNature campaign to life, increasing understanding of our habitats and species and connecting people with nature. The focus of this year's festival is the "sights and sounds of nature". We are focusing on in-person activity at two all day events at either end of the National Park (SSCP and a heathlands festival at Hogmoor Enclosure), with lots of different opportunities to learn about and connect with nature, with everything from sunset safaris to bug hunts to willow weaving for people to enjoy.
- 4.19 As well as pop up events by the ranger and comms teams, we will be attending a host of other events, focusing on audiences we are not currently reaching. This will include Jalsa Salana which sees 45,000 people arrive for a week long gathering, the Southampton Mela and events focusing on nature and climate action. Volunteers are also welcome to help, and it is a great way to get out and meet our residents and visitors.
- 4.20 We have been very busy with **media** work both proactive and reactive. Reactive queries have flooded in about the illegal clearance at Lurgashall, with queries about National Park funding also being received.
- 4.21 For our 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, a short film went out to the nation from the top of Butser Hill for ITN Evening News. This snippet was seen by several million people and really showcased the beauty of the National Park on a spring evening. To tie in with the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, Siôn was interviewed for an hour-long "hotseat" special on BBC Sussex, covering everything from planning to nature recovery and the goals of the National Park Authority.
- 4.22 In early June we launched our **Partnership Management Plan** consultation which received good traction. We did interviews on BBC Sussex and Heart FM. We were delighted to see the piece picked up by BBC online which has a huge reach, but also by Farmers Weekly, as our farming community is so integral to the delivery of the Partnership Management Plan. We are continuing to promote the consultation widely as we want to hear from as many people as possible.
- 4.23 **Downs to the Sea** and the planning permission granted for works at **RSPB Pulborough Brooks**, the nature recovery initiative at **Halnaker Hill**, the **ReNature Festival** and our **nature recovery campaign** has also garnered lots of coverage. Our surprising hit story of this period has been our story about **Natterjack Toads**, which went literally everywhere!
- 4.24 We are working hard to grow across all our **Digital** channels and to beat that algorithm to make sure our content is reaching and landing with people. With things changing so much continually, this takes a lot of work, but this is really paying off. Our social media following has risen from 88,516 in Q1 of last year, to 123,886 this quarter. We are optimising our still photography, using more video and we continue to try new styles to not only reach and engage our audiences, with our average reach across all channels being a healthy 8.2%, which is very positive considering some of our channels such as Bluesky, are very new.
- 4.25 The biggest surge has been in our **Facebook** which has seen a new lease of life. However, this has brought its challenges, with the channel becoming a much more negative place overall, needing careful management. We now have over 54,000 followers on Facebook with an engagement rate of 9.43%.

#### HR and Recruitment

- 4.26 Since 1 April 2025, 3 employees have left the organisation including our long-serving Conservation Officer David Boyson who has taken retirement.
- 4.27 We have welcomed 4 new members of staff:
- Rob Green - Major Planning Projects and Performance Manager and new member of OMT
  - Kate Williams – Conservation Officer



- Jem Gibson – Public Engagement Ranger
- Kirsty Murray - Seasonal Assistant Engagement Ranger

We are also delighted to welcome James Winkworth to SLT as Director of Growth and Organisational Development.

- 4.28 Laura Sercombe's time sadly ends with us at the end of the year. Therefore, we will shortly be launching the recruitment of a new Landscapes and Operations Director.
- 4.29 Last month we launched 2 new **employee benefits**: an Electric Vehicle Salary Scheme and Heat Scheme.
- 4.30 The new **EV Scheme** is administered by Octopus and as it is a salary sacrifice scheme it offers significant reduction in the cost of leasing a vehicle but also on charging points, servicing, breakdown cover and insurance.
- 4.31 **Heat Scheme** provides an online portal that offers advice on reducing heating bills, improving home comfort, funding, grants and contractors. SDNPA are also offering a capped interest-free green home improvement loan to staff for costs associated with reducing carbon emissions at home.
- 4.32 Along with our existing **Cycle to Work** scheme, these new benefits are part of our wider offering to staff that supports wellbeing and enables employees to significantly reduce their carbon footprint.
- 4.33 **Health, Safety and Wellbeing** - we have recently introduced health surveillance for our ranger teams, which include hand and arm vibration testing and audiometric screening and we will be re-testing every 2 years.
- 4.34 We have also re-formed our **Culture Group** to include wellbeing and there were some really positive initiatives coming forward from staff at the meeting.
- 4.35 In April we launched our **Health and Safety Survey** with resulted in a much-improved response rate of 69%. The feedback from staff was positive on H&S awareness, knowledge and training and the majority of staff agreed that health and safety was a high priority for SDNPA.

#### Governance

- 4.36 Last year the Authority responded to the **Government's consultation on whether or not to permit remote attendance and whether or not to implement proxy voting at local authority meetings** – which would include our National Park Authority meetings and committee meetings. A remote meeting in the context of the consultation covered both hybrid meetings and wholly remote meetings. Proxy voting is when a Councillor / Member is unable to attend a meeting to vote and they delegate their vote to a representative to vote on their behalf.
- 4.37 The Government's response to the consultation was published on 5 June 2025. In summary, the Government supports allowing remote and hybrid attendance at meetings. They plan to permit local authorities to develop their own locally appropriate policies, which is as we had suggested in our response. The Government plans to legislate for this when parliamentary time allows. It is very clear though, that in person attendance remains the preferred method of engaging in these meetings, and this will remain our approach. Remote and hybrid attendance is not intended to replace in person attendance, but rather to support Members to attend meetings on the occasion that in-person attendance is not possible. As the implementation of this approaches, we will consider carefully how best to support both Members and Officers to join meetings remotely where necessary.
- 4.38 The Government has also decided to require principal councils to implement proxy voting, whereas other local authorities will be enabled, but not required, to implement it. Our response to the consultation as an Authority did not support the introduction of proxy voting. In line with this, and as we are not a principal council and, therefore, will not be required to

implement proxy voting, I do not expect us to implement proxy voting for meetings of the Authority or its committees. This will, however, be subject to further discussion and a decision by the Authority.

- 4.39 **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** is a fast-moving area with significant potential to support a vast range of our work, both in the office and out across the National Park. However, people can be hesitant to explore how AI can support their work, either due to unfamiliarity with it or due to concerns around some of the risks AI can present. However, a [recent Government trial of AI](#) which involved more than 20,000 civil servants highlighted the huge potential for AI to support our daily work.
- 4.40 We are excited about the potential AI holds for unlocking smarter and more effective working across the Authority. In order to set the Authority on the path to take advantage of AI, a working group of officers have been working on a plan to ensure all staff feel able to use and explore the potential for AI to support their work. The group has produced our first AI Guidance document which covers what AI is, some of its potential uses, and how we make sure we use AI safely and responsibly. Alongside this, a training plan for staff across the Authority is being developed and investment in a secure AI platform is planned.
- 5. Conclusion**
- 5.1 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 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2025 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail, or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

## **SIÔN McGEEVER**

### **Chief Executive Officer**

#### **South Downs National Park Authority**

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Appendices None

SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive; Director of Landscape and Strategy; Director of Planning; Director of Growth and Business Development; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager

External Consultees None

Background Documents N/A