

Learning & Improvement Summary 2023-24

1. Background

Over the last few months, a learning & improvement strategy has been developed within the Performance & Projects (P&P) Team, the actions for which will be fully implemented by Q4 2025 – please see **Section 3** for a simplified summary.

As part of this strategy development, it was recognised that the P&R Committee Terms of Reference (Appendix 4, paragraph 4.1) outlines its responsibility *“To monitor and identify improvements arising from the outcomes and evaluation of projects identified by the Committee, audits, survey and other feedback and make recommendations as appropriate.”* Consequently, it was agreed by P&R Committee in Q2 2034/24 that an annual summary of learning and improvement will be brought for review at year end - this paper is the first iteration to be submitted.

Next year, this annual report will have a different format to reflect the strategy actions developed over 2024/25. It will include references to the internal ‘learning library’ plus the ‘learning action plan’ to be overseen by OMT.

2. Learning & Improvement 2023/24

During 2023-24, resource was dedicated to the development and launch of the Performance Tracker reporting platform. This platform offers a much easier mechanism for Project Managers to complete end of project reporting which detail the successes/challenges of project components, complete with lessons learned. End of project reviews are saved onto the platform and are visible to all users aiding those developing projects with shared attributes. The end of project review is also shared with OMT for governance purposes.

This last year, £30,172 was spent on internally commissioned Research & Evidence from the ringfenced budget managed by the Performance & Projects Manager. Learning was also captured through project funded research, end of project reviews, corporate surveys and sharing from external stakeholders.

This report includes selected key highlights of learning and improvement across the organisation from 2023/24.

2.1. Research and Evidence

In 2023/24, £30,172 from the Research & Evidence budget funded externally commissioned studies to extract evidence and data to support SDNPA Corporate Plan priorities.

Highlights from these studies and how they are being used are featured below.

2.2. Nature Recovery

- Prioritisation of Species in the South Downs National Park by Ecosulis; £12,867**
 This analysis of species records provided by Sussex and Hampshire Biodiversity Record Centres provided a starting point to quantify the biodiversity importance of the South Downs and to understand the spatial distribution of priority species. The findings of this report will help inform the SDNPA’s strategy for species recovery and to build an evidence

base for prioritising species for targeted recovery interventions. Since the research was commissioned the This work will be in line with the national targets defined in the 2023 Environment Improvement Plan; namely to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030, and increase abundance by at least 10% to exceed 2022 levels by 2042.

The research scope included:

- Quantify the national biodiversity importance of the South Downs.
- Quantify the priority species within the different habitat assemblages.
- Understand the spatial distribution and abundance of these priority species and identify species considered as South Downs Specialities.
- Understand the spatial distribution and abundance of Invasive Non-Native species within the Project Area.
- Identify species whose range may expand to the SDNP, or who are likely to become scarcer within the SDNP due to climate change.

The species identification work has helped SDNPA to select key species for monitoring through schemes that offer reliable and widespread data. In December 23, a decision was made to focus on four key species assemblages: Butterfly, Bat, Bird, Bee species. Monitoring (except bees) will be established in 2024 and be linked to the ReNature action taken to improve or create key habitats.

- **Earth Observation Work (South Coast GIS) £14,250**

Earth Observation data has been analysed by SDNPA since 2015 in order to monitor changes across the SDNP and surrounding areas including change by landscape character type (LCT), Land Cover, Natural Capital, Urban Greenness, Grassland Extend and Health, Woodland extent and over-winter bare soils. The purpose of this research along with other data sources, is to provide evidence in support of the SDNPA's Partnership Management Plan (PMP) and the Authority Monitoring Report (AMR).

2.3. A National Park for All

- South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd Business Plan 2024-2025, influenced by
 - **Seven Sisters Country Park Visitor Survey by TSE Research; £3760**
 - **Visit England Quality Standard for Visitor Attractions Report**

A Visitor Survey was commissioned in 2023/24 providing an insight into visitor demographics, behaviours and motivations during visits to SSCP. Findings from the survey have informed the 2024-25 SDCO business plan. For example, only 40% of visitors travelling by car found it easy to pay for parking. As such, the business plan includes the upgrade of parking meter modems from 3G (which is due to be switched off) to 4G, improving connection and providing a more reliable service. It will also be highlighted to visitors that the Visitor Centre, Trailer and Grab & Go can also take parking payments.

Additionally, the visitor survey cemented SSCP staff's first-hand experience that visitors could not navigate the site easily to locate the various facilities. The business plan includes aims to develop a costed proposal to improve signage around Exceat and into the park. Encouraging visitors to safely use the A259 crossing point and creating a frictionless flow for

key facilities such as car parks and toilets will improve onsite visitor experience and drive footfall to food & beverage and visitor centre outlets.

The Visit England Attractions Accreditation was also completed this year. Feedback from the assessor suggests that due to the complexities of the site, it was likely that SSCP would never score highly. It should be noted that this year's assessment took place on a busy weekend when the visitor facilities were busy, there were queues, toilets were overwhelmed and the site in general was not providing the most positive visitor experience. The future merits of the accreditation will be considered.

- **Volunteer Working Group and Volunteer Panel**

In May 2022 the Authority commissioned independent consultants Heritage Insider to undertake an independent review of the current volunteering model.

This process included a desk-based review of strategy, processes and evaluations, consultation with key staff, the VRS Committee Chair and partner organisations who engage SDNPA volunteers.

The consultants also conducted an online survey of current volunteers, a WhatsApp VRS focus group and an in-depth consultation with a small sample of Youth Action volunteers.

Following the receipt of the review document, a small staff and volunteer working group has been established this last year to take forward the recommendations of the volunteer review. This is running in parallel to a newly established Volunteer Panel to act as a sounding board through the change process.

The review implementation plan will lead to a new model of volunteering that is fit for the future, is sustainable, draws on best practice and is responsive to the changed internal structure of the SDNPA and the national and regional policy contexts.

2.4. Climate Action

- **Small world Consulting (SWC); £15,000 external funding via National Parks England**

SDNPA have been working with Small World Consulting (SWC) to develop a dashboard and tracker for the land use change and forestry (LULUCF) element of our Net Zero targets. This dashboard will enable us to update on progress annually against our 2019 baseline. This will be using the national data issued by the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero and our own local data on nature-based carbon projects. The tracker will assess this progress against our targets and whether we are on course with our planned trajectory/descent curve to our Net Zero target of 2045.

2.5. Rural Economy

- **SDNP Business Support Survey 2023 by Team Telemarketing; £11,400**

To better comprehend the management approaches, attitudes, and aspirations of businesses within the Park, SDNPA commissioned Team Telemarketing to conduct a Business Support Survey, carried out in December 2023.

The SDNPA set a goal of 300 telephone interviews across diverse organisations within three specified business sectors: Land-based; Visitor attraction; Food & Drink.

The survey outcomes are anticipated to furnish crucial evidence guiding the SDNPA's formulation of an effective engagement strategy.

Key findings include:

- Businesses identified a number of barriers to them, the ones most relevant to the SDNPA were:
 - Rank 1 - High energy costs (59%),
 - Rank 3 - Transport (33%),
 - Rank 8 - Planning (28%), see point below.
- 27.6% of respondents highlighted Planning as a barrier for their organisation, approx. Respondents said the current processes are not flexible enough, too slow/long, too complicated and expensive.
- 2% of the businesses surveyed had a net zero target. Over 90% haven't calculated their carbon footprint. Lack of time + lack of knowledge (50%) were cited as the main reasons for this.
- 30% of businesses stated they'd perceived climate change as having a negative impact on their business (9% positive, 61% no impact).
- Business' perceive sustainability as important to customers (63%) and supply chains (62%).

Next steps:

- There's still a clear role for 'Our South Downs' to keep championing sustainability & helping businesses understand, calculate and achieve reductions in CO2.E emissions. Develop support within 'Green South Downs' certification around Carbon footprinting and Net Zero Targets. Onboarding more businesses to GSD will support this.
- Energy costs as a main barrier presents an opportunity to support businesses while also contributing positively to tackle climate change impact. Investigate ways to support businesses with this – e.g. Free Energy Audits.
- Planning - inputs for the Local Plan Review. The feedback from businesses to be shared with Planning colleagues for consideration. Explore ways to improve Planning Processes to better support a sustainable, thriving rural economy.

2.6. Projects

2.6.1. Closed projects

- **TAP:** The Aquifer Partnership (TAP) was established in 2020 as a continuation of the Chalk Management Partnership (ChAMP) – a collaborative project established in 2016 to protect and improve the quality of groundwater in the Brighton Chalk Aquifer. TAP comprised of four key partners - Environment Agency, Southern Water, BHCC, and SDNPA. Along with the other partners, SDNPA contributed £100,000 to help support programme delivery and generate additional leveraged funding for a five year project period.

The Aquifer Partnership has disbanded a year earlier than anticipated but ongoing delivery from the TAP programme will continue via the oversight of the Living Coast Partnership, which includes SDNPA representation.

Learning from the project was identified through an end of project review exercise, with additional input from TAP partners.

Recommendations for SDNPA emerging from this project will be monitored by OMT through the new learning action plan, to be set up in 2024. These recommendations focus on amending internal process to help improve internal project governance and support.

- **Cut & collect:** The Ecology Co-op were commissioned by SDNPA to undertake botanical surveys of 13 verges across West Sussex over three years to monitor how changing the annual management affects their botanical diversity. The long-term aim of the SDNPA project was to introduce a 'cut-and-collect' management scheme across selected road verges on the National Park that is intended to enhance road verges, provide more areas of species-rich grassland and improve habitats for insects and pollinators.

The consultant submitted the final report in Q4 2023/24 with lessons and recommendations for future study. The report will be used by the Project Manager to determine next steps.

Key findings include:

- Results were largely neutral, with no meaningful or positive change, or significant increase in species richness or diversity from year one to year three following a change in cut and collect regime. Despite this, the study has confirmed the presence of lowland calcareous grassland (NVC code CG), which is a habitat of principal importance in England, and is particularly rare along road verges, in large part due to mismanagement.
- A plethora of species were recorded across the three-year study - 194 species were recorded within quadrats across eight roadside verges, with up to 32 species per m² in some areas. The lack of an anticipated improving trend in species richness across the verges may be attributed to issues surrounding management consistency and the effects of a severe drought in 2022.

Priority areas for the future were highlighted, some of these include:

- Extending the study period would likely help account for verge management interference (drought and management inconsistency) and allow grassland communities time to recover from extreme weather events, leading to more robust data collection.
- Any future study must consider stakeholders in the project design. Had stakeholder engagement been more extensive before the project commenced, to include dialogue with landowners, results could have been more positive, or at least more concrete.
- A detailed management strategy could be considered for individual verges, to include the timing and frequency of cutting on survey data collected from summer site visits. This would however be an intensive approach requiring a considerable time investment to assess all verges that the cut-and-collect system may be applied to in the future.

2.6.2. Live projects

- Wealden Heath SAMM: In 2023, the project team commissioned an external consultancy to gather information on the public use of seven countryside sites in and around the town of Whitehill & Bordon. Face-to-face interviews were carried out at seven survey locations with a random sample of visitors.

The results showed that most dog walkers on the selected sites are long established in the community, with a regular presence on the project sites. They may have set habits and could be quite hard to dissuade from their usual behaviour. To support positive behaviour change, the project team are now increasing the frequency of the site patrols, whilst reducing the length of the patrol route as it appears that most users stick to short walks near the main car parks.

71% of visitors were accompanied by a dog, however, only 27% of visitors were aware of the Take the Lead Campaign. The rates for people picking up their dog waste were below 50% and for keeping their dogs on the path in bird nesting season was below 30%. To tackle this issue, the project team are also increasing the number of pop-ups at car parks to improve engagement with the local audience plus changing the project messaging to focus on the idea of preserving the landscape that visitors appreciate so much.

- Project managers working on large construction projects including Centurion Way and the reed bed at SSCP, have identified a potential need to set up procurement frameworks for regular services such as ecologists, planning consultants, architects etc. These services are regularly called upon by SDNPA but the individual project tender processes can create a bottleneck causing project delays. Procurement frameworks have been used within SDNPA before e.g. evaluation services. This recommendation will be added to the learning action plan for further discussion.

2.6.3. General

- The Performance Tracker platform can be used to pull out up to date project information as well as live statistical data regarding performance against KPIs. This will aid staff looking to communicate consistent and up to date projects and performance information to a wider audience. The Research and Evidence Officer is also liaising with the Comms team to compile a list of frequently used statistics that can be used for engagement, including press and social media, that is ensured to be legitimate and current.

2.7. Planning

- Local Plan list of evidence

The Local Plan Review evidence review is underway and will include:

- Housing and Economic Needs Assessment (HEDNA)
- Employment Land Review (ELR)
- Land Availability Assessment (LAA)
- Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA)
- Landscape Assessment
- Water Cycle Study and Strategic Flood Risk Assessment

- Renewable Energy Study
- Transport Assessment
- Settlement Facilities Study
- Town Centre Audit
- Local Green Space (LGS) Assessment
- Open Space Assessment
- Sustainability Appraisal / Environmental Outcomes Report (the latter if we get the guidance in ahead of the first LPR consultation)
- Habitats Regulations Assessment
- Viability Assessment
- Equalities Impact Assessment

Further evidence on Tourism, Sustainable Construction, Health & Wellbeing and BNG will also be developed.

Most of this evidence will be published alongside the Local Plan document for Reg 18 consultation currently expected in January 2025. The evidence review will be finalised in September 2024 .

2.8. Corporate

- **Health & Safety Survey 2023**

The survey questionnaire was developed by the H&S Working group and the P&P team to review staff attitudes and knowledge regarding health and safety in the workplace. The subsequent report presented key findings to OMT and the H&S Working group which formulated an action plan to support areas for improvement. Areas for improvement related to awareness, process, training and staff responsibilities.

- **Staff Survey 2023**

IQVIA were procured to run the 2023 staff survey, an iteration of the staff survey that was undertaken in partnership with IQVIA in 2018.

Key findings were shared with senior management, as well as presented to all at the All Staff Event in September 2023.

A Staff Survey Working Group was established to formulate an action plan to implement recommendations from the report findings. This work will continue in to 2024/25.

2.9. External Research & Evidence

Below are a selection of papers that have influenced corporate strategy and direction over the last year:

- [National Lottery Heritage Fund 2033](#): The investment principles of saving heritage; protecting the environment; inclusion, access and participation, and organisational sustainability set a quality standard for projects, and also unites the natural and heritage environment into a single space. Grants linked to this Strategy launched on 1 February 2024.
- [Arts Council England Let's Create 2020-2030](#): As above, the investment principles set a standard for arts and creative projects. The investment principles of ambition and quality; inclusivity and relevance; dynamism and environmental responsibility parallel some of our own Corporate Priorities but go further by encouraging calculated risk taking to explore

potentially innovative approaches and thinking. This is not a recent strategy, having launched in 2020, but is still at the forefront of framing creative practice.

- [East Sussex Public Health Creative Health Position Paper](#): This paper is a precursor to an anticipated strategy and action plan, but has been instrumental in creating a collective of practitioners and organisations in East Sussex (and wider Sussex) which bring together creativity and healthcare. It also helps to frame our cultural heritage and wellbeing work within a wider strategic space. This launched early 2024.
- [Natural England: Nature Recovery and the Historic Environment](#): This guidance launched last year and sets out the principles of integrated approaches to nature recovery to ensure not only due diligence to the historic environment, but the methods in which cultural heritage can engage communities and support landscape decision making. It is an excellent document.

2.10. Other

- **Climate Action Workshop 25th January 2024**
The workshop afternoon session created an opportunity for Members to advise what their own authorities are doing regarding climate action. The session acted as an exchange of ideas and information to promote learning from Authority to Authority.

2.11. Looking Ahead

There are many learning opportunities identified for the coming year, 2024/25. The Research & Evidence budget has been allocated £85,000 of funding, and the Evaluation budget has been allocated £35,000 of funding, fenced for the PMP Review.

- **State of the Park Report**
The report will be reviewed and updated by March 2025. The review will receive input from strategic leads and key Planning colleagues and will seek to evidence the impact of the SDNPA and partners in preserving and enhancing the special qualities of the South Downs.
- **PMP review**
The update of the SDNPA State of the Park report in 2024 will provide a solid evidence base to help measure progress against key PMP outcomes, linked with the DEFRA outcome measures. Regular monitoring of quantitative and qualitative PMP KPIs will identify learning and improvement areas. The review process itself will identify learning through consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders.
- **Field maps/Survey 123**
The use of Esri Apps to record nature recovery action by rangers and grant recipients will be reviewed to look at the quality of the mapping data and to identify any improvements to ensure best available data is being recorded.
- **30 by 30**
Measures are set to be developed
- **Local Plan**

- Innovate UK project using OnePlanet strategy mapping
- Small World: The Climate tracker dashboard will be launched enabling the South Downs and other National Parks to track progress towards Climate Action targets more easily
- Earth Observation Mapping: Going forwards into 2024/25, there is an opportunity to begin to analyse the change that has occurred over the last 8 years for each landscape character type and to begin to assess whether this has been significant and/or harmful change. The aim of this work would be to understand how each LCT has been maintained/ impacted since 2015 and to use this as a measure of success (or not!).
- Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework: Further data will be received from Natural England in 2025 which will be embedded into reporting and the PMP review.

3. Learning & Improvement Summary Strategy

Projects

- **End of project review**

Internal projects must complete an end of project review highlighting key findings & learnings from project and SDNPA perspective

- **In depth project evaluation**

Select internal projects could require either externally commissioned evaluation or internal light touch evaluation which P&P Team can manage or deliver. Projects recommended for evaluation by PLO with decision made by OMT chairs.

Non-Projects (BAU/Core Work/Process)

OMT to commission reviews & evaluations, based on papers/requests raised with OMT, to be delivered by P&P Team. Previous examples include Health & Safety/ Blended working/ Staff survey/ Duty Planner

Evaluation

Evaluation support

P&P Team can also assist externally led projects with evaluation processes e.g M&E Planning, contractor procurement, data collection methodology

Communication

Learning Library

Read-only source documents to be available to all staff via dedicated MS Team Channel.

Performance & Projects Bulletin

Quarterly internal bulletin to include performance and project highlights including key learnings and research points of interest

Case studies

Case studies (multiple formats) uploaded to intranet, website & social media channels

Monitoring

Live action plan

PLO to manage & maintain learning action plan, from all sources, via MS Teams visible only to OMT members & other relevant staff.

Annual summary to OMT

PLO to present learning summary of all current recommendations/actions annually in Q3 to OMT. OMT to escalate or request further action if required.

P&R Workshops

Member workshops dedicated to in depth review of particular project/core work as requested by Members

Formal Reporting

P&R end of year Learning & Improvement Report

End of year learning paper to be submitted with Q4 reporting to P&R Committee. This paper will be a modified version of Q3 paper to OMT. OMT to advise on any changes required for P&R paper. Final sign off by OMT/SMT before submission with Q4 reports.

Internal sources of learning			
Source	Type	Where saved?	How collected?
Projects	End of Project review forms	Performance Tracker Ms Teams library	Project process
	Formal evaluations	Performance Tracker (if uploaded) MS Teams library	Follow up procurement lists, P&P team knowledge
	Post project review sessions e.g Access projects/SSCP team	MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops*
Commissioned research	E.g visitor surveys, business surveys	MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge
Process evaluations	E.g WEPS, PMP process	MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops
Corporate surveys/reviews	E.g H&S, Blended working, staff survey	MS Teams library (for transparency unless confidential)	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops
Best practice guidance	Outputs from projects, research, core work	MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops
External sources of learning e.g Professional networks, Partners, NPUK, DEFRA guidance, Other			
Source	Type	Where saved?	How collected?
Project evaluations		MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops
Research		MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops
Best practice guidance		MS Teams library	P&P team knowledge, Staff workshops

*Staff workshops = Stand alone if needed, otherwise agenda item within existing Strat Leads/Working group meetings

