

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING

Held at 1.00pm on 28 March 2024 in the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH.

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Annie Brown, Tim Burr, Antonia Cox, John Cross, Peter Diplock, Chris Dowling, Janet Duncton, Mark Fairweather, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, John Hyland, Gary Marsh, Stephen McAuliffe, Jerry Pett, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Daniel Stewart-Roberts, Vicki Wells and Stephen Whale.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Tim Slaney (Chief Executive(Interim)), Anita Kerwin-Nye (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Mike Hughes (Director of Planning(Interim)), Louise Read (Monitoring Officer), Nigel Manvell (Chief Finance Officer), Lynne Govus (Head of Finance and Corporate Services), Claire Kerr (Countryside and Policy Manager), Ruth James (Communications and Engagement Manager), Mark Alden (Nature Based Solutions Manager), Vicky Paterson (HR Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance) and Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer).

Also attended by:

Dean Orgill (Chair of the South Downs National Park Trust), James Winkworth (Head of the South Downs National Park Trust / Head of Marketing and Income Generation), Sarah Davies (Natural England) and Laura Newland (Natural England).

CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

161. The Chair welcomed all present and informed them of general housekeeping matters.
162. Members and members of the public were reminded that SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthered the National Park Purposes and Duty. Members regarded themselves first and foremost as Members of the Authority and would act in the best interests of the National Park as a whole, rather than as representatives of their appointing body or any interest groups.

ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

163. Apologies were received from Debbie Curnow-Ford, Theresa Fowler, Maggie Jones and Robert Mocatta.

ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

164. The following declarations were made:

- Janet Duncton declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 as a Trustee of the South Downs Trust.
- Annie Brown declared a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a neighbouring business owner.
- Chris Dowling declared a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a Director of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited.
- Mark Fairweather declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 10 as a Wealden District councillor.
- Vanessa Rowlands declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 10 as a Cuckmere Valley Parish councillor.

- Stephen Whale declared a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a Director of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited.
- Tim Burr declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 15 as a named person in the report.
- Stephen McAuliffe declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 15 as a named person in the report.
- Daniel Stewart-Roberts declared a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 20 as a Lewes District councillor.

ITEM 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS HELD ON 12 DECEMBER 2023

165. The minutes of the Authority meeting held on 12 December 2023 were approved as a correct record.

ITEM 4. URGENT MATTERS

166. There were none.

ITEM 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

167. There was none.

ITEM 6. NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

168. Members were asked to consider the exclusion of the public, including the press, from the meeting for Agenda Item 20.
169. The Monitoring Officer outlined the reasons for the consideration of this exclusion under paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, being information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person including the Authority and that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exempt information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. It was proposed that whilst there was a public interest in maintaining the transparency of Authority proceedings relating to the delivery of its planning service, on balance this was outweighed by the need for the Authority to be able to consider matters in relation to its business and fully consider the implications of its proposed actions which would have implications for the agreements regarding the ongoing delivery of its planning service without the disclosure of information that could undermine its position or its ability to deliver value for money through these arrangements.
170. **RESOLVED:** The Authority resolved to move into private session to consider Agenda Item 20 and that the public, including the press, would be excluded from the meeting at the appropriate time.

ITEM 7. AUTHORITY CHAIR UPDATE

171. The Authority Chair introduced the report (NPA23/24-23).
172. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

ITEM 8. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S PROGRESS REPORT

173. The Chief Executive introduced the report (NPA23/24-24) and provided the following updates:
- There would be a slight delay in the delivery of the second tranche of funding secured for Generation Green.
 - Funding had been secured for the purchase of some trampers for Egrets Way, details still to be confirmed.

- The planning inspector had requested that the inquiry be reconvened in May to examine why Rampion 2 was going through the National Park.

174. Members made the following comments:

- Good to see officers being agile in response to last-minute government funding opportunities and demonstrating the importance of having ‘shovel-ready’ projects ready to go.
- Great to see all the work being done by the Authority in the face of uncertainty around the government grant.
- How was the decision taken for the planning department to provide planning services for the Isles of Scilly?
- There had been reports in the press of a change in the government’s interpretation of the 30x30 targets in favour of food production.
- Had there been any progress on matters concerning the Angel Inn?

175. Members were advised:

- Exmoor National Park had previously provided the planning service for the Isles of Scilly. The Council of the Isles of Scilly unitary authority had approached the SDNPA and the service was currently being run as a one year trial. The trial involved a small number of applications. If the trial proved successful and resource appropriate a report would be brought to NPA.
- There had been a recognition by the government that food production and ReNature needed to go hand in hand, and the government commitment to the target remained.
- Progress around the Angel Inn was dependent on the speed of action of the insurance companies.

176. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report.

ITEM 9. SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK TRUST ANNUAL UPDATE

177. The Chair of the Trust and Head of the Trust provided Members with a verbal update.

178. Members made the following comments:

- Did recipients need to produce any follow-up reports on the efficacy of projects?
- Supportive of apprenticeship opportunities but noted that they were only for forestry projects. Was there scope to widen that?

179. Members were advised:

- Follow-up reports were important as the Trust must be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of projects to obtain funding. The Trust would like to make the process more systematic, using technology to make it easier and to provide richer data to inform future projects and improve their effectiveness.
- Projects were run in partnership so apprenticeship opportunities depended upon the available projects and their resourcing. Officers were also examining apprenticeship opportunities across the Authority.
- Officers were looking across the Authority and Trust to ensure duplication of projects was avoided.

ITEM 10. CHALK COAST NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE: PROPOSAL TO EXTEND LULLINGTON HEATH NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE TO INCLUDE LAND AT SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK

180. Mike Hughes, Chris Dowling and Stephen Whale left the meeting.
181. Annie Brown exercised her right to speak under the Member Code of Conduct and commented that Natural England were working with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as key partners which had left some farmers and landowners feeling neglected.
182. Annie Brown left the meeting.
183. The Countryside and Policy Manager (Eastern Downs) introduced the report (NPA23/24-25).
184. The Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee noted that this report had been subject to a full discussion at the P&R Committee meeting on 29 February. The Committee were reassured by the approach taken, the concept and the compelling nature of the project.
185. Members made the following comments:
- A really exciting project, bigger, better nature recovery at scale.
 - Lots of land owned by public bodies so NGO's natural partners for this project as they had existing policies in place, then widen out to local communities.
 - The use of Exmoor Ponies was a good step to help protect an endangered species.
 - The map in the report (Figure 1) had obvious gaps. Did this reflect those who had shown an interest or was it because of geology? How would the rest of the area be incorporated into the project?
 - What implications might this have on the financial stability and management of Seven Sisters Country Park?
 - Was Eastbourne Borough Council looking to become an approved body?
 - Could Officers provide more detail on the deteriorating water quality?
186. Members were advised:
- National Nature Reserves (NNR) and Super National Nature Reserves (SNNR) were an important part of delivering against government targets, so declaration should help attract funding from external funding streams.
 - The project was initially focused on the key landowning bodies able to become an Approved Body. Spatially the SNNR proposal focused on the chalk block and associated aquifer between Seaford and Eastbourne. In due course there was scope to expand the proposal to include affiliated landowners.
 - Partners were currently working towards the proposal going to the Natural England Board in the Autumn of 2024. Following declaration, the governance and management framework would be co-produced and set up.
 - Both the Board of South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd and the Authority had examined potential implications, and there was strong confidence that there were no issues for either. The proposal referred to the SSSI land at SSCP owned by the Authority and did not include the buildings at Exceat.
 - Several of the partners, including Eastbourne Borough Council and Seaford Town Council, were also looking to become Approved Bodies. The National Trust was already an Approved Body.

- This was the first groundwater inspired SNNR. Water quality had been analysed by South East Water through their ProWater initiative and the research had demonstrated that the habitats overlying the chalk aquifer were key to the quality of the water. Trees were important for cleaning nutrients, and without them nutrient levels were rising and on the verge of needing chemical intervention in some locations. This was expensive and had negative side effects. Mechanical intervention in water quality had a carbon cost whereas nature-based solutions had a beneficial impact on carbon capture.

187. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted and welcomed the emergence of the Chalk Coast National Nature Reserve proposal of Natural England which involved the extension of Lullington Heath National Nature Reserve;
2. Delegated Authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, subject to professional advice obtained, to issue a letter of intent seeking to become an Approved Body under section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for the land at Seven Sisters Country Park currently designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest also to be designated as a National Nature Reserve becoming part of the emerging Chalk Coast National Nature Reserve;
3. Noted that Natural England would provide an update on the process in summer 2024 and may seek further decisions from the National Park Authority at that stage; and,
4. Delegated Authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make any further decisions required by Natural England pursuant to recommendation 2, provided that there was no material change in circumstances as set out in this report.

188. Mike Hughes, Annie Brown, Chris Dowling and Stephen Whale returned to the meeting.

ITEM 11. REVENUE BUDGET 2023/24, CAPITAL STRATEGY 2023/24, TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023/34 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2024/25-2028/29

189. The Chair noted this was the Head of Finance and Corporate Services' last NPA meeting and extended her thanks to the Officer for her contributions to the Authority.

190. The Chief Finance Officer introduced the report (NPA23/24-26).

191. Members made the following comments:

- £5k for solar panel cleaning seemed expensive.
- £8k had been allocated for the repair of some original phase one signs of the National Park Signage Project. Did this imply that the new signs are unlikely to need such a contingency?
- Was the £70k assigned to the cladding replacement project final or would more funding be required?
- Would the Authority be able to obtain any further recompense for the cladding?

192. Members were advised:

- The solar panel cleaning contract had been subject to a competitive tendering process.
- The new signs were not in need of a contingency fund as they did not share the failings of the original phase one signs.
- Cladding replacement work had started, £70k was the carryover into next year.
- There was no prospect of obtaining any further recompense for the cladding.

193. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:
1. Approved the Revenue Budget 2024/25 of £10.417 million including a contribution to general reserves of £0.069m as detailed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.31 and Appendix 1.
 2. Approved the Capital Strategy 2024/25 including new capital projects totalling £0.240 million and the capital variations, as recommended by the Policy & Resources Committee, of £0.688 million – a total of £0.928 million of capital investment - as detailed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.31 and Appendix 2.
 3. Approved the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 at Appendix 3 as recommended by the Policy & Resources Committee.
 4. Noted the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 – 2028/29 at Appendix 5.

194. The meeting adjourned for a short comfort break.

195. Mark Fairweather left the meeting.

ITEM 12. UPDATE ON SOUTH DOWNS GREEN FINANCE SUMMIT

196. The Communications and Engagement Manager introduced the report (NPA23/24-27).

197. Members made the following comments:

- What was being planned around the accord that had been proposed in the October report?
- Would the event be webcast live?

198. Members were advised:

- At the end of the event the accord (principles and application) would be introduced and used as a follow up to invite interested parties to sign.
- The event would be recorded and a live webcast was being explored. It was important that this did not hamper discussion on the day.

199. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the updated plans for the South Downs Green Finance summit.

ITEM 13. REVISED CORPORATE PLAN MEASURES

200. The Director of Landscape and Strategy introduced the report (NPA23/24-28).

201. The Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee commented that the Committee supported the tightening of the wording for the Corporate Plan measures following their meeting of 29 February 2024.

202. Members made the following comments:

- Was the Authority changing Higher Level Target no 6 because it was dropping volunteering and was that because it had proven harder to recruit volunteers?

203. Members were advised:

- The Authority would continue to count volunteers and was not changing the target because volunteer recruitment had proven more difficult.

204. **RESOLVED:** The Authority approved the revised measures for Higher Level Target no.6 and Corporate Priority no.7 in the SDNPA Corporate Plan Action Plan Years 4 & 5.

ITEM 14. RECRUITMENT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

205. The HR Manager and the Head of Governance introduced the report (NPA23/24-29).

206. Members made the following comments:

- Reassured that the Authority was obtaining advice from other National Parks given the specialist nature of the position.
- What kind of recruiter was the Authority looking to appoint? Top end recruiters may charge 30% of salary. Was the Authority getting value added?

207. Members were advised:

- The Authority was not looking to cut costs. The cost had been estimated based on available evidence having researched what other National Parks had done and after consultation with other National Park chairs and a Human Resources network. Getting the right service was the key priority.

208. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Agreed that the appointment of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) should not be made exclusively from among the existing Officers of the Authority;
2. Noted the process and intended timeline leading to the appointment of the permanent Chief Executive which was delegated to the Appointments, Management and Standards Committee to undertake.

209. Mike Hughes and Stephen McAuliffe left the meeting.

ITEM 15. APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES

210. The Head of Governance introduced the report (NPA23/24-30).

211. Members made the following comments:

- Was there any significance to the backdating of the appointment of a director?

212. Members were advised:

- Officers would seek advice to ensure there were no legal implications of the appointment. There would be no issue created in relation to any decisions taken by South Downs Commercial Operations Limited since the start of the year.

213. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Appointed Tim Burr, Deputy Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority, ex-officio as a Trustee of the South Downs National Park Trust.

In its capacity as Shareholder of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited, the Authority:

2. Appointed Stephen McAuliffe as a Director of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited until the Authority's AGM in 2024; and
3. Appointed Mike Hughes as a Director of South Downs Commercial Operations Limited and agree this appointment be backdated to 1 January 2024.

214. Peter Diplock left the meeting.

215. Mike Hughes and Stephen McAuliffe returned to the meeting.

ITEM 16. REVISIONS TO AUTHORITY STANDING ORDERS

216. The Head of Governance introduced the report (NPA23/24-31).

217. Members made the following comments:

- Was the 'contract for services' wording used to allow the Chief Finance Officer to be appointed through Brighton and Hove City Council?

218. Members were advised:

- The ‘contract for services’ wording was being used to allow the Chief Finance Officer to be appointed through Brighton and Hove City Council.

219. **RESOLVED:** The Authority agreed the revisions to Appendices 4 and 6 of the Standing Orders for Regulation of Authority Proceedings and Business (“Standing Orders”) as set out at Appendix I of the report and instructed the Chief Executive to publish the updated Standing Orders on the Authority’s website.

ITEM 17. PLANNING COMMITTEE MINUTES

220. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 9 November, 14 December 2023 and 15 February 2024.

ITEM 18. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES

221. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 23 November 2023.

ITEM 19. APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT & STANDARDS COMMITTEE MINUTES

222. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meetings held on 25 May, 19 September and 14 December 2023.

223. Daniel Stewart Roberts left the meeting.

224. The meeting was closed to the public, including the press, and moved into private session at 3.08pm.

ITEM 20. S101 HOST AUTHORITY ARRANGEMENTS – LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL

225. The Director of Planning (Interim) introduced the report (NPA22/23-32).

226. Members considered the report.

227. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Agreed that, in principle, the South Downs National Park Authority enters into a new Agreement under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972 with Lewes District Council to provide a quality development management service for 1 year.
2. Delegated authority to the Director of Planning to negotiate, complete and sign the Agreement referred to in 1) above, subject to any substantial issues being referred back to the Authority for consideration.

ITEM 21. APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT & STANDARDS COMMITTEE MINUTES

228. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meetings held on 25 May and 14 December 2023.

229. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.27pm.

Signed _____