

Report to **Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **19 September 2024**
By **Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead**
Title of Report **Update on progress against Volunteer Review change programme**
Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to note the progress made in delivering the Volunteer Review recommendations

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Volunteers are a great practical resource allowing for targeted delivery of tasks and making a huge impact in the delivery of Corporate and Management Plan objectives. Volunteers are also important ambassadors for the SDNP as well as contributing towards the organisational objectives of our partner organisations across the SDNP. In turn, the benefits to individual volunteers are significant and include connecting with others and socialising, greater nature connection and physical and psychological wellbeing.
- 1.2 The context in which the SDNPA operates has changed significantly since our establishment. Changing lifestyles, later retirement, the need for more flexibility, increasing need for activities to support health & wellbeing (especially post-pandemic), the expectations of younger and more diverse participants and the acquisition of Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) all necessitated a rethink of our traditional model of volunteering to ensure it remains fit for purpose and delivers effectively against our organisational priorities.
- 1.3 The Authority commissioned independent consultants, Heritage Insider, to undertake an independent review of our volunteering model from May-September 2022. This process included a desk-based review of strategy, processes and evaluations, consultation with key staff, the VRS Committee Chair and partner organisations who support SDNPA volunteers. The consultants also conducted an online survey of current volunteers, a WhatsApp Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) focus group and an in-depth consultation with a small sample of Youth Action volunteers. This review led to a series of recommendations to the Authority.
- 1.4 In July 2023 the P&R Committee endorsed the direction of travel for volunteering and asked for a further update as the recommendations of the Volunteering Review were implemented. This report summarises the progress made to date against the review recommendations.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1 This workstream is the key delivery mechanism for achieving Outcome 8.1 in the Partnership Management Plan: To increase and diversify volunteering opportunities that support the National Park.
- 2.2 It also delivers against all three of the SDNPA Corporate Plan priorities, delivering Climate Action and nature benefits whilst supporting our ambitions for a National Park for All.

3. Issues for consideration

- 3.1 **Volunteer Review recommendations and change programme:** The Volunteering Review led to a series of recommendations structured around three key areas: Reframing volunteering within the SDNPA, move to a more flexible/integrated model of volunteering and resourcing a transition period. The key activities and progress against these can be seen in **Appendix I**.
- 3.2 **Structure of volunteer management:** A key recommendation from the review was to move away from a separately constituted VRS model to a more direct relationship. At their AGM in July 2023, members of the VRS voted unanimously to dissolve the Volunteer Ranger Service, with immediate effect with volunteers becoming South Downs National Park Volunteers. This model is more efficient and ensures direct relationship management between staff and volunteers.
- 3.3 **Steering the change process:** A small staff Volunteer Review Working Group has been established to take forward the Volunteer Review recommendations via a two-year programme of change. The Chair of the VRS at the time of its dissolution also sits on this group to ensure continuity. Ensuring volunteers have a voice in the change programme is key and to facilitate this we established a Volunteer Panel made up of 10 volunteers representing different volunteer groups, roles, demographics and geographies. Volunteers sit on the Panel for one year and we are in the process of refreshing the Panel as we move into Year 2. Feedback from the first Panel members has been unanimously positive with praise given to the staff team for how volunteer contributions have been positively acted upon.
- 3.4 **Streamlining volunteer administration:** In order to create a more efficient and flexible model we are moving towards a self-service model for Better Impact, our volunteer software system which we have used since 2018. Volunteers will be able to sign-in and access tasks, update their personal information and access key documents in a one-stop shop. This will create greater flexibility in the tasks that they are available to access and give more ownership to volunteers in choosing and booking onto tasks and recording their volunteering hours. A task and finish group of key staff is supporting the Volunteer Coordinator in working with the Software Developers to scope the technical changes and training needed to implement this.
- 3.5 **New volunteering roles:** One of the key outcomes we are looking to achieve is to diversify volunteering opportunities supported by the SDNPA and broaden the range of people who are able to access these. In addition to our highly successful South Downs Youth Action programme for 16-24 year olds, we will be piloting a junior version for 11-16 year olds this autumn. This will also enable those young people completing Duke of Edinburgh Awards to complete their volunteering section with the SDNPA. Other new roles created this year include: SSCP public engagement volunteers, River Guardian volunteers focusing on Dragonfly monitoring, Mink control and Himalayan Balsam management, Barn owl monitoring and Hedge monitoring volunteers.
- 3.6 **Volunteer journey:** In addition to improving efficiencies and diversifying opportunities we have also been focusing this year on enhancing the volunteer experience from initial recruitment to exit. A great deal of work has been undertaken to create recruitment packs, improve online content for volunteers, refine clothing ordering systems and create a new and exciting programme of volunteer education, training and celebration events.
- ### 4. Options & cost implications
- 4.1 Volunteering is a key delivery mechanism for achieving not only our Corporate Plan priorities but also the wider Partnership Management Plan outcomes.
- 4.2 The activities being delivered in our current volunteering change programme are built on the clear recommendations from the independently commissioned Volunteer Review.
- 4.3 Volunteering is not a free resource and requires staff time to coordinate, support, lead and manage volunteers. It also requires core funding to ensure volunteers have appropriate clothing, PPE, training and support. Resource is in place to ensure the volunteers can be managed and serviced in the most effective way and to monitor outcomes.

4.4 However, the benefits of our volunteering programme significantly outweigh the running costs. The Volunteer Review calculated the average net return per year from SDNPA supported volunteering as £1,019,210. In total, the SDNPA generates a return of £10.52 worth of benefit for every £1 invested in volunteering. This breaks down as £2.02 of net economic benefit and £8.50 private benefit for every £1 invested.

5. Next steps

5.1 The Volunteer Panel will be refreshed with recruitment of a new cohort of panel members in September 2024. The Volunteer Panel will continue to steer the implementation of the change programme in conjunction with the Volunteer Review working group.

5.2 The Better Impact technical changes will be implemented throughout autumn 2024 with specific volunteer roles testing and trialling the new self-service model before wider roll out to all volunteers by March 2025.

5.3 The Investing in Volunteers standard will be used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this two-year programme of change and enable us to continue to review the effectiveness and quality of our volunteering programmes.

6. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	There will be a need to uplift the core volunteering budget for 2025-26 slightly to support the recruitment, induction, training and management of these new volunteering roles including provision of clothing, PPE, role specific training and equipment. This will be incorporated into 2025-26 budget development.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	Volunteering is essential to supporting the delivery of SDNP purposes. Its benefits vastly outweighs the costs, both in terms of the economic value to the National Park of work undertaken and in the health & wellbeing benefits to individuals (i.e. social return of investment). At present, volunteering generates a return of £10.52 for every £1 invested which equals over £1m net per year in benefits to the landscape.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	PMP Outcome 2: Increasing resilience, Outcome 3: Habitats and species, Outcome 5: Outstanding experiences, Outcome 7: Health and wellbeing, Outcome 8: Creating custodians Corporate Plan HLT 1, 2, 5, 6
Links to other projects or partner organisations	The SDNPA volunteers support partner organisations across the SDNP with the delivery of positive outcomes for nature and climate. Some of this activity is directly led by partner organisation staff and/or project teams.

Implication	Yes*/No
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	<p>Volunteering is a key mechanism in the delivery of practical conservation activities across the National Park. Many of these tasks contribute positively to the Authority's climate change objectives including increasing the quality and habitat diversity of wildlife sites, increasing habitat connectivity and providing opportunities for positive social and environmental action. This is described in more detail in the SDNPA Climate Action Plan.</p> <p>Increasing the participation of volunteers, expanding and diversifying tasks and creating more flexible models will both increase the potential for delivery on the ground and also enable more people to take positive action for climate.</p>
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	No
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Yes. The change programme aims to create more equitable access to volunteering opportunities supported by the SDNPA. It is underpinned by evidence of volunteer demographics and engagement to date and looks to proactively support activities (such as South Downs Youth Action) to improve diversity and inclusion within our volunteering model.
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?	Yes. Some of the new roles being developed require lone working, working at height or working near water. All of the new roles have been subject to risk assessment and appropriate training and supervision plans have been implemented.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	Yes. The move towards volunteer access to Better Impact has been discussed with the Data Protection Manager to ensure the necessary controls are in place and that the privacy notice and data protection information is read and understood by all volunteers.

7. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

- 7.1 It is not anticipated that there are significant risk associated with the implementation of the review. This is due to the co-design approach developed which mitigates many potential risks around how volunteers would respond to the change programme.
- 7.2 Describe any risks associated with the recommendation including possible risks to delivery, budgets in the table below.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Use of Better Impact by volunteers is not taken up – which might result in a reduction on the number of volunteers	Unlikely	Moderate	<p>Ensure appropriate information and training is provided to volunteers to help the transition to using the Better Impact system.</p> <p>Ensure staff are appropriately trained to support volunteers to make the transition.</p>

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Appendices I. Progress against Volunteer Review Recommendations

SDNPA Consultees Chief Executive; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services

External Consultees None

Background Documents A ‘people-powered’ National Park: A review of the South Downs National Park volunteer programme, 2022

