

**SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY  
POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 27 JUNE 2024**

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 10.30am

Present: Annie Brown, Tim Burr, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Baroness Jones of Whitchurch and Jerry Pett.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: Morris Findley

Independent Members of the Committee: Catriona Aves and Tom Fourcade

Other SDNPA Members: Vanessa Rowlands (Chair of the Authority).

SDNPA Officers: Tim Slaney (Chief Executive (Interim)), Mike Hughes (Director of Planning (Interim)), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Colin Carre (Centurion Way Project Manager), Chris Fairbrother (Strategy Lead – Climate Change and Net-Zero), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Lynne Govus (Head of Finance and Corporate Services), Cath Jackson (Strategy Lead – Nature Recovery), Hayley Madgwick (Procurement Manager), Nigel Manvel (Chief Finance Officer), Claire Onslow (Commercial and Strategic Manager), Anne Rehill (Performance and Project Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance), Miriam Swan (Grants Officer), Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services), James Winkworth (Head of Marketing and Income Generation) and Mark Winton (Chief Internal Auditor).

**OPENING REMARKS**

224. The Chair opened the meeting.

225. The Chair welcomed all those present and stated that:

- The meeting was being webcast by the Authority and would be available for subsequent on-line viewing. Anyone entering the meeting was considered to have given consent to be filmed or recorded, and for the possible use of images and sound recordings for webcasting and/or training purpose.
- SDNPA Members had a primary responsibility for ensuring that the Authority furthers 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.

226. The Chair welcomed Vicki Turner, the new Head of Finance and Corporate Services for the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), Annie Barnes the Deputy Monitoring Officer and Mark Potter who was awaiting confirmation by the Secretary of State to become a Member of the Authority.

227. The Chair noted that this would be the last meeting for Lynne Govus and Annie Brown, and she paid tribute to them both for their service and contributions.

**ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

228. Apologies were received from Steven Ridgeon and Vicki Wells.

**ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

229. Annie Brown declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 10 as she owned a farm business that was delivering the grazing.

**ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 29 FEBRUARY 2024**

230. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 29 February 2024 were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

- Page 8 Minute 170 first bullet point should read '*Good to see conservation bring treated with the same priority as social engagement with the heritage*'.
- Page 11 Minute 183 first bullet point last line should read '*tree planting*' rather than '*tree planning*'.

#### **ITEM 4: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS**

231. The Chalk Coast National Nature Reserve (NNR) was awaiting approval by the Natural England board which was expected to occur in November. An update from Natural England on the process required for the Authority to become an approved body was expected summer 2024.
232. The Conservation Covenant Agreement application to Defra had been submitted and a response was awaited.
233. A preferred bidder had been identified through the Crown Commercial Service framework for the Planning Administration System procurement as part of the process of implementing a new 3-year contract which was scheduled to start 1 April 2025.
234. There had been a tender process to secure an external audit of Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) but no suitable provider was found to undertake the accounts audit for the trading company. The Authority was now in discussion with Grant Thornton to undertake part of that work when they undertake the Authority audit. There would be a note on the accounts to that effect.

#### **ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS**

235. There were none.

#### **ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

236. There was none.

#### **ITEM 7: NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

237. Members were asked if anyone wished to raise any point of accuracy in the part II minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 February 2024 at Agenda Item 21. No Member wished to raise any points of accuracy.
238. Members were asked to consider the exclusion of the public, including the press, from the meeting for Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 16 and Appendix 4 of Agenda Item 19.
239. The Deputy Monitoring Officer asked Members to consider whether, in respect of Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 16 and Appendix 4 of Agenda Item 19, the public, including the press, should be excluded from the meeting on the basis that it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if a member of the public were present during the items there would be disclosure to them of exempt information within paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, being information relating to the financial or business affairs of 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 is proposed on the basis that whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of Authority proceedings, corporate risks, and of audit results, it is felt that on balance this is outweighed by the requirement of the National Park Authority to be able to consider matters in relation to its business and fully consider the implications of its actions or proposed actions particularly in relation to decisions which may have implications on the effective day-to-day running of the Authority without the disclosure of information that could adversely impact the day-to-day running of the Authority and its ability to deliver its services.

240. **RESOLVED:** The meeting would be moved into private session at the appropriate point to consider Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 16 and Appendix 4 of Agenda Item 19 and that the public, including the press, would be excluded from the meeting at that point.

#### **ITEM 8: CHAIR UPDATE**

241. The Chair provided a verbal update:
- Thanked colleagues for their contributions at the recent Away Day and noted that recommendations from the day were included in Item 17 and would also contribute to a future paper to the NPA concerning the Committee's Terms of Reference. The Risk Register pre-meeting would be expanded to include an Audit element.
  - Noted the Performance and Project Manager was working on the Partnership Management Plan, together with officers in the Planning directorate working on the Local Plan and to ensure the two documents sat together.
  - Interviews had been held for the third co-optee vacancy and a strong candidate was recommended for approval at the next full Authority meeting.

#### **ITEM 9: Q4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND PROJECTS REPORT 2023/24**

242. The Performance and Project Manager introduced report PR23/24-40 and reminded members of the report content.
243. The Committee commented that:
- The format of the report was clear and helpful for Members.
  - In relation to the Higher-Level Targets (HLT) for nature recovery
    - Concern over the progress against the 33% of land managed for nature from a baseline of 25% given the Campaign for National Parks (CNP) report whose metrics indicated only 6% for National Parks. Keen for a firmer footing on this matter noting the ambiguity from government over clarifying the starting point.
    - Could the Authority be more ambitious in its targets, given that over 6,000 of the 13,000 hectares target for 2030 had already been achieved?
    - How quickly will the 3,000 hectares in the pipeline be achieved and make an impact?
    - The Authority needs to be clear where it currently stands before considering increasing targets.
    - Other National Parks had used local pony breeds as a tourism lure. Was there a Sussex breed that could be used for these purposes?
    - What confidence does the Authority have in the longer-term sustainability of new areas that are being created for nature? How fixed are they and what monitoring is being done to identify drop out?
    - Monitoring of Whole Estate Plans (WEP) after endorsement to capture improvements would feed into data capture.
    - Need a positive provision within the accounts to cover the costs of monitoring and maintaining these areas. It doesn't seem prudent to rely upon the goodwill and interest of landowners.
    - There are limited powers and mechanisms to monitor and intervene on private land owned by private landowners.
    - How were the target species of birds, bats, butterflies and bees chosen as the key focus for the South Downs from 2024/25?

- Understand the need to pick marker species and raised the importance of insect populations to nature restoration.
- Core nature data capture is vital but not clear what is included, if it could include all land and stewardship schemes the Authority would have already met its targets. The changing landscape of grants and support make this a complex and ever-changing environment that requires agility from both landowners and the Authority.
- Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) will play an important role in this.
- Astonished that the metrics for the 30x30 target had not been settled some time ago. The Authority needs to report against national targets is this report the only way? Are we doing well in Defra's eyes? If our local targets are more ambitious, where and in what form would that be reported?
- National targets were published early 2024 but many didn't yet have metrics or sources agreed. Focusing on local targets was therefore the only way to demonstrate progress.
- Given the numbers in this report, is the committee content that as a National Park Authority, we have achieved what is needed to achieve in terms of the requirement placed on us by DEFRA, and the answer to that seems to be yes.
- In regard to HLT 3, to what extent does the Authority understand the execution and performance of those Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) commitments within those applications? Does it generate a body of knowledge regarding good and bad practise? Does it engage with developers to provide thought leadership on this topic?
- Could officers confirm that the 26.7% a theoretical figure based on applications rather than a delivered figure based on what's built out?
- Was this BNG figure just from applications from within the Park or does it include contributions from planning applications outside the Park that use the SDNP as a recipient?
- The rapid land assessment tools that the Authority had implemented had been great and were preferable to desk-based assessments.
- BNG figures could be even more complicated if it's land within the NP which was being offered to other authorities.
- Can Members have assurance there is no double counting of BNG figures with other authorities where their BNG is being delivered within the Park through green finance?
- Great to see watercourses included in HLT 3. Was there any scope to increase on watercourse improvement? Could this be pushed as a preferred means of delivery?
- Off-site BNG could deliver much more value than on-site BNG because it was able to deliver at landscape scale. Worth remembering at a green infrastructure level given the general preference to see it delivered on-site.
- In relation to the Higher-Level Targets for Climate Action:
  - Would it be correct to say that if the Authority continued to achieve -150 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> for the next two years it would achieve net 0?
  - Were the total annual SDNPA carbon emission figures net?
  - The bottom-up work with Climate Action Networks was important and would benefit from the Knowledge Hub, scaling and connecting local work across the Park.

- Would it be possible to have an update at the September meeting if the forestry data was received by the end of July?
- In relation to the Higher-Level Targets for a National Park for All:
  - Very positive and comprehensive report. It's amazing to see the Q3 and Q4 contribution exceed the KPI target by 10 times. The Authority can be much more ambitious going forward.
  - The social media numbers look great but there is concern about duplication across different platforms and channels. If someone follows the Park they are also likely to follow Seven Sisters. Not sure how to avoid double counting but the Authority needs to be aware.
  - The digital team were doing a great job with YouTube subscribers doubling.
  - Last year the old volunteering scheme was looked at being closed and starting a new scheme. How was that process going and when could Members receive an update?
  - At the P&R Committee meeting on the 25 July 2023 minute 13 noted that Members *'Would like to see a practical plan with targets so the implementations success would be measured. Risks might have changed, different levels of risk should be added detail given on how this would be litigated.'* Keen to see a follow up paper after the consultation period had concluded.
  - Great to hear that the existing volunteers were happy with the changes being implemented, but what about those not currently volunteering? The demography of volunteers had previously been a concern as most had been retired. Would value the opportunity to reflect on and discuss these issues in due course.
  - The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) program had shifted to focus on people so some of those projects would feed into this area.
  - Great to see the school outreach work being done including the Community Travel Grant Scheme opening up the Park to new people. The scheme was a good example of partnership working with Community Transport Sussex taking on the responsibility for things like safeguarding and health and safety.
- In relation to Progress against other Corporate Plan Priorities:
  - Appreciate that the Authority had been innovative and entrepreneurial in attempting to build a new green finance income stream and that targets had changed due to market uncertainty. How could meaningful targets be generated for the period ahead that were both possible and challenging? How was the Authority navigating the policy realm? Was it engaging directly with policy makers, which would also increase the visibility of the work.
- In relation to Appendix 4 Q4 2023-24 Annual Governance Statement update and Appendix 5 Q4 2023-24 Human Resources & Health and Safety update:
  - Was the review of the Authority's fraud and anti-corruption whistleblowing policies on the internal audit plan for the forthcoming year?
- In relation to Appendix 6. Learning & Improvement 2023-24:
  - Welcomed the report and agreed it should be a separate paper in future.
  - Would the Earth Observation Mapping, once fully up and running, be of value for WEP's, farm clusters, FiPL and those who use the carbon calculator?

- The disappointing Wealden Heath figures on people picking up their dog waste and keeping their dogs on the path in bird nesting season indicated lots more education needed to be done.
- In relation to Appendix 7. CCC (Compliments, Comments, Complaints) report 2023-24:
  - Overall a positive report. It did raise questions around Chichester as a partner authority but caution required around drawing too many conclusions given the low numbers involved..
  - It would have been helpful to have had the proportions next to the bar charts on complaints given 5,500 applications handled and only 40 complaints.
- In relation to Appendix 8. SDNPA Annual Review 2023/2024:
  - The case studies helped bring the report to life and the graphics were well chosen.
  - Was the Annual Review shared with the Authority's partners, such as the Campaign for National Parks (CNP)?

244. Members were advised:

- In relation to the Higher-Level Targets (HLT) for nature recovery:
  - There is currently a debate around the setting of metrics. CNP report looked at Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as a proxy, excluding both ancient and natural woodland that the SDNPA considers should be included given only 6% of the SDNP consists of SSSI's. It is reasonable to have both nationally set and locally set targets.
  - Need to be cautious at this stage about what is actually delivered against what is in the pipeline. There is a time lag created by the market for voluntary credits which is outside the Authority's control. The land in the pipeline may prove more difficult to achieve than that which has already been delivered.
  - Where new places for nature are not linked to green finance or (BNG) pledges often need to be taken on trust. Officers will consider how such voluntary areas could be appropriately monitored, which would not necessarily need to be done by the Authority.
  - There has been analysis done on the costs of monitoring BNG, nutrient neutrality and green finance to ensure the Authority has the right resources in place, and a grant was received from government to get ready for BNG which has enabled the Authority to recruit an in-house ecologist but in some cases the Authority will need to rely on the goodwill of landowners.
  - Species monitoring is a complex piece of work that involved a comprehensive trawl of data comparing numbers within the Park to within the UK more generally to identify what species were special for the Park, what were typical for the Park and where action could be taken. Population estimates exist for a relatively small number of species which is a limiting factor.
  - This report and the Authority's financial data are the basis for the SDNPA's quarterly reporting to Defra. Defra ask the Authority how it delivers against the Authority's own targets. Going forward this will be more complex due to the Protected Landscape's outcomes and targets framework. Lots of targets don't yet have baseline data, methodologies and comparisons. The Authority won't set additional targets but could define its own measures. It wouldn't be reporting on two different numbers for the same target but would be reporting on an additional set of measures that it had introduced with partners, alongside the national ones, that made sense in the local landscape context.

- BNG has been incorporated into the SDNPA Local Plan since 2019, is now legally mandated, and a TAN Technical Advice Note (TAN) was released in March. Spot checks are undertaken and enforcement complaints are responded to. As this is an innovative policy area, some biodiversity interventions have not been as successful as envisaged. Those learnings have been taken onboard by officers and there will be some mistakes in the future but generally developers have been able to deliver this relatively smoothly both onsite and offsite.
- The 26.7% is a theoretical figure based on planning applications received.
- The BNG figure includes only BNG from applications received from within the Park. The green finance system offers credits to areas outside the Park for provision within the Park and that is measured separately.
- Members could be assured there was no double counting in the figures provided.
- There was little flexibility available on watercourse improvement as the regulations around BNG delivery were very specific.
- In relation to the Higher-Level Targets for Climate Action:
  - If the Authority continued to achieve -150 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> for the next two years it would indeed achieve net 0.
  - The total annual SDNPA carbon emission figures are net. Some offsetting would always be required.
  - There was a lag in data, but in principle it should be possible to provide an update on the forestry data at the September meeting as the work over last 2 years had put the Authority in a position to be able to monitor this.
- In relation to the Higher-Level Targets for a National Park for All:
  - There was positive news on volunteering around changing and improving the volunteer model. Capacity had increased as part of a two-year transition, evolution rather than revolution. There was a panel of current volunteers who were involved in shaping the new volunteer format. There was also a small internal working group with a volunteer representative on it doing more detailed work. A further paper could be provided to the Committee.
  - The Community Travel Grant was researched to evidence the approach undertaken. The scheme was launched in April and had already received 12 applications. The South Downs Trust had been able to bring in additional funding and there was a review meeting scheduled for August.
- In relation to Progress against other Corporate Plan Priorities:
  - The Authority was learning on the move. Risk was relatively low as the money generated was being placed into reserves rather than general funds. Target setting would improve with experience. Officers were engaging in making contacts, such as through the Green Finance summit. Both National Parks England (NPE) and Defra were keen to support the SDNPA's work in this area but Officers were conscious they need to engage with other Government departments.
- In relation to Appendix 4 Q4 2023-24 Annual Governance Statement update and Appendix 5 Q4 2023-24 Human Resources & Health and Safety update:
  - The review of the Authority's fraud and anti-corruption whistleblowing policies was on the internal audit plan for the forthcoming year.
- In relation to Appendix 8. SDNPA Annual Review 2023/2024:

- The Annual Review was shared with partner organisations.

245. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q4 Corporate Performance and Projects Report 2023/24.

**ITEM 10: Q4 SOUTH DOWNS COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS LIMITED PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24**

246. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-41 and reminded members of the report content.

247. The Committee commented that:

- The target of £1 per head had been exceeded by 40%. This appeared to be an undemanding target and suggested fresh thinking was required to be more ambitious.
- It was refreshing that Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) was not overly profit driven. If it was viewed as an expensive day out it may deter certain demographics, so there was a balance to be struck between income generation and access for all.
- Car Park capacity would be reduced by 25% summer 2024. Had an agreement with Forestry England to use their car park been reached?
- The Chalk Coast SNNR was likely to increase future visitor numbers. The Black Robin Farm development may also increase visitor numbers.
- How full was the order book of the accommodation management company?
- The impact of the weather had been considerable and SDCOL could not rely on the weather improving. Had any modelling been done of increasing income streams away from parking and towards accommodation, camping and refreshments?

248. Members were advised:

- Targets were being reviewed and the next plan would also provide 'per transaction' figures.
- Conversations with Forestry England were ongoing. There were some challenges with how to get people safely from the car park to the site.
- There had been a soft launch of the accommodation. Bookings had increased by 50% following the Guardian article. There was a growing process as the company established its marketing and benchmarking but signs were encouraging.
- This was a challenging site and the team were currently establishing baselines. Monitoring the current accommodation with the provider to see whether targets needed to change. It was expected to improve but consideration was also being given on how to deal with seasonality.

249. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Q4 South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL) performance report 2023/24.

250. Committee adjourned for a comfort break 12.10pm

**ITEM 11: ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES FUND (SCF)**

251. The Grants Officer introduced report PR23/24-42 and reminded members of the report content.

252. The Committee commented that:

- Had most projects that had been allocated funds been delivered?
- Where do we capture these projects?



- Was the policy that only partial rather than full funding was provided?
- Was match funding sometime a barrier for applicants?
- Were the grants only for capital or could maintenance funding also be applied for to ensure good things continued?
- Was the underspend due to a lack of bids, or low-quality bids?
- Was there a follow up on projects to measure their impact?

253. Members were advised:

- During Covid some projects didn't go ahead, and one grant was dependant on a lease being obtained, but otherwise projects that had been allocated funds had delivered. There were two panel meetings a year to check progress and to allow for funds to be reallocated if a project encountered issues.
- Projects were reported to the Performance and Project Manager's team. Funded projects must submit a monitoring report following the conclusion of the project. Case studies were also captured.
- Part of the criteria for this grant fund was that it was match funded to encourage applicants to engage with other partners.
- The SCF did not monitor whether match funding was a barrier but the SCF can advise on potential partner. Part of the match could be volunteer time and these grants often go to organised community groups that usually have volunteers, so it should not be a barrier. The match funding process explains why it sometimes takes time for a project to get off the ground.
- Applications were usually for capital for this fund, but part of the application process was consideration of its sustainability.
- The underspend was due to a lower number of bids, and one of the bids failed to meet the required criteria.
- SCF projects are often unique but as part of the application process the panel may request monitoring information from projects. That might be a report or ecological report or a survey monitoring of species. SCF can also liaise with the local ranger to ensure a flow of information on impact is returned.

254. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the annual review and year-end position of the Sustainable Communities Fund managed by the South Downs National Park Trust.

## **ITEM 12: LARGE GRANTS UPDATE**

255. The Head of Marketing and Income Generation provided a verbal report.

256. The Committee commented that:

- Do Trust projects feed into the Learning and Improvement paper?
- The Trust provided an independent source of ideas and critique whilst aligned with the Authority's aims.
- What relationship, if any, was there between failed Nature Recovery in Arun Valley project and the Down to the Seas project?
- There had been no awards in the South of England for Landscape Recovery and it was unclear when the next round would occur which made planning difficult. Confidence was needed that the effort put in would be worthwhile.
- Thanked officers for the significant resources secured for the Park.

257. Members were advised:

- Trust projects did feed into learning and improvement. The Trust had funded a new funding and impact officer and were keen to make the process more systematic. They were seeking longer term data to inform future projects. Learnings were shared with partners where possible and this was a continual process.
- Downs to the Sea had limited crossover with the Nature Recovery in Arun Valley project but was substantively different. There was an attempt to set up the Arun Valley group as a mini-farm cluster and a third application may emerge after positive feedback from Defra.

**ITEM 13: PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN DELIVERY 2024-25 FOR NATURE RECOVERY, CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONAL PARK FOR ALL**

258. The Performance and Project Manager introduced report PR23/24-43 and reminded members of the report content.

259. The Committee commented that:

- What confidence could be had that a project would be completed when begun?
- While the Authority's access agenda was wide, the provision of high-grade infrastructure was a pre-condition. The Authority's risk appetite seemed well judged.
- Important to inform local residents about the impact of reNature projects in a Protected Landscape environment.
- Great to see the work being done with youth ambassadors. Board apprenticeships was a potential avenue to explore.
- Was the Authority missing awareness of any national projects such as 'New to Nature' which sponsored traineeships in Protected Landscapes? Important to be aware of any funding opportunities.
- Excited by the Knowledge Hub, the Active Travel England funding and the new Cycling and Walking Strategy.
- Worth reviewing these targets at the next P&R meeting once the new government had signalled its priorities.
- There was an opportunity to provide the next government with evidence to help new Ministers understand deliverable targets. The Authority needed to actively engage not wait passively.
- The 2024/25 activity offsetting scheme for the Climate Change Programme 3 seemed sensible, clear and logical. There was often ignorance around what offsetting was, it would be good to have a public policy that had been subjected to scrutiny and clearly expressed the policy framework.
- Would welcome the opportunity to see the draft offsetting policy at the September meeting even if it was just the National Policy version.
- Supported the direction of going to under-represented groups as part of National Parks for All.
- Could clarity be provided around the choice of terminology around under-represented vs under-served?
- Was intersectionality being monitored?
- Could Outframe Framework Target 5 just read 65% rather than 65% -80% and could a single figure be used for the land area rather than 10% to 15%?

- Selling carbon credits is a huge area of discussion for land managers and the challenge around selling credits against needing that land to ensure their own operation is zero carbon.
- Could the River Meon be considered for inclusion as part of the Action for Core Nature? Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) training would be valuable for Members, especially to aid Parish Members in understanding what it looks like in their parish.
- Good for all Members to have sight this report as it would not go to NPA, could it be shared.

260. Members were advised:

- If you waited for everything to be lined up before beginning a project you may never begin. Due diligence, assessment of risks and likelihood of completion were done before starting work. Launching a project unlocked further funding and developed momentum. Ambition was important and even if a scheme didn't fully connect up, the individual components would have a positive impact.
- As part of the Race to Zero work had been done on an offsetting policy. An outline policy was currently being worked on and the draft could be shared with Members once ready.
- Underserved was the preferred nomenclature as it placed the emphasis on the organisation to reach the group. Lot of recent work on how to get even basic data.
- The Authority was looking at how to improve monitoring. It was yet to appropriately tackle intersectionality. Officers to explore possibilities in monitoring that appropriately.
- BNG training had been provided for Planning Committee Members. This could be rolled out to other Members.

261. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the priorities for Nature Recovery, Climate Change and National Park for All for 2024-25.

262. Committee adjourned for lunch at 13.15pm and reconvened at 13.51pm.

#### **ITEM 14: ANNUAL REVIEW OF PLANNING PERFORMANCE: FINANCIAL YEAR 2023/24**

263. The Director of Planning (Interim) introduced report PR23/24-44 and reminded members of the report content.

264. The Committee commented that:

- The number of applications had decreased. Had the introduction of BNG played a part in this by adding another hurdle to be overcome? Could the Authority provide guidance to help this not be a barrier?
- Applaud the ambition to reduce the use of extensions of time. Applicants could be put in a difficult position around the use of extensions due to the power imbalance between the applicant and the officer, and there was a potential risk of subverting government monitoring on meeting performance targets through the use of this process.
- If deadlines could not be met normally then that should be clear so that this could be addressed.
- Extensions of time were a challenge due to the increasing complexity of the planning system and other bodies were under pressure to respond in time.
- How many appeals are upheld or dismissed is fine as a measure of quality for refusals, but how can the Authority measure the quality of approvals from partner authorities?

- What significance, if any, would last week's supreme court decision have?
- It was good to see the return of farmer breakfasts as a source of help and advice to farmers.
- Appeal performance looked good with a significant reduction in the number of appeals indicating decisions were increasingly accurate.
- What could be done with old planning applications that were still outstanding?

265. Members were advised:

- The decrease in applications was national and preceded the introduction of BNG. There was a BNG TAN and the team were advising applicants as the system was new.
- Time targets had been in place for 25 years and the system was much more complex now so pragmatism had led to the increasing use of extensions of time by most authorities.
- Stopping the use of extensions to time would lead to more refusals. Overuse of extensions of time could cause irritations but was often required by large complex schemes.
- Like any large service there could be variations in quality but there was a balance to be struck in trusting host authorities to do the work. Planning was very monitored and the link officer followed up on any concerns and training was provided where required.
- The Supreme Court decision on the downstream impacts of oil extraction could have large impacts but it was too soon to know exactly what they might be.
- The management team regularly review cases, both Authority and host, to see why they are still outstanding, after 6 months for enforcement, 12 months for applications.

266. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

- I. Received and noted the Annual Review of Planning Performance.

#### **ITEM 15: CENTURION WAY CONTRACT PROCUREMENT**

267. The Procurement Manager introduced report PR23/24-45 and reminded members of the report content.

268. The Committee commented that:

- Impressed with the reuse of materials on this project.
- Understand that officers tried to avoid demobilisation costs. Could this be futureproofed against?
- Was there still an aspiration to use the tunnels?

269. Members were advised:

- This project was broken down into nine stages as funding was not in place to do together and there were also constraints around landowner consent and ecological measures. If funding for the next three stages could be done together that would help increase efficiency.
- The first tunnel had potential as it was outside the SSSI and studies were ongoing. The other two tunnels may be revisited in the future.

270. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Approved the commencement of a procurement process leading to the appointment of a contractor to undertake construction of Section 5 (Wellhanger Copse) and Section 6 (Littlewood Farm) of Centurion Way Phase Two Extension.
2. Delegated authority to the Chief Executive to award a contract for the above, following a competitive process as described in the report.

#### **ITEM 16: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER**

271. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-46 and reminded members of the report content. He noted a correction to paragraph 3.2 Risk 02 which should refer to 24/25 budget not 24/24 budget.
272. The Committee commented that:
- The Risk Register meetings were very useful. At what stage did these discussions feed into the Risk Register as some items seemed to recur?
  - The numbering of the risks was potentially confusing as not all risks were included. It would be useful to be able to clearly see when a risk had left the register.
  - It's great that an internal audit had now been conducted and that has answered, or confirmed, a lot of the concerns expressed at the meeting in February.
  - Had there been any further progress on Mitigation 20 and the crossing at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)?
  - Were there any lesser mitigations or traffic calming measures that could be put in place for a reduced cost?
  - If funding was available would West Sussex County Council implement the scheme?
  - If the Authority was trying to increase visitor numbers, was that also increasing the risk? Should efforts on increasing visitor numbers be slowed until the crossing was resolved?
  - If an accident did occur there was potential for massive reputational damage and other harms. Should it be a higher risk? Should the Authority be seen to be making it a priority?
  - Was the crossing being considered in tandem with the new bridge and removal of the traffic calming chicane. Was there any scope for combining these projects? Should the Authority formally object to the removal of the chicane without the provision of a crossing?
  - The Committee may wish to hold a more focused session on strategic risks, and opportunities, once the new government had been elected. Timing of such a session would be key.
273. Members were advised:
- The Risk Register was reviewed and updated by Officers ahead of the meeting, then the points raised are discussed with the relevant Officers following the meeting.
  - Officers were aware of issues around the numbering and it had been in this format for the last eight years. As part of the risk guidance and strategy report which was coming before the Committee in September there would be consideration of updating the numbering system.
  - There had been a meeting between the Chair of the Authority, the Director of Planning and a number of political representatives in East Sussex on the SSCP crossing. This was an area of concern for the Authority and actions had been agreed. It would cost £100,000's to install a crossing and the county council did not have that funding available. Alternate actions were being considered within the resource constraints.

- The Authority had commissioned a study to investigate options, conscious that they were not the Highway Authority. The consensus view of the recent meeting was that traffic lights were needed, but other options had been explored..
- Officers were of the opinion that if the funding was available then ESCC would install the crossing. First stage was to create a concept design which could be implemented once funding became available. There would be a request at the Community Infrastructure Levy workshop to assist funding for obtaining a design.
- The three main goals of SSCP were land management, financial stability and a first-class visitor experience. The current focus was not on actively trying to increase overall numbers but to spread the numbers out across the week.
- Planning Committee had already approved the bridge scheme. There was a proposal for a 30mph limit. The Authority should focus on what it was able influence.
- The Members Workshop in October with Jayne Butler of National Parks England was scheduled to consider risks and opportunities in the light of the King's Speech. This would enable Officers to meet with any newly elected MPs within the Park and understand their focuses and concerns.

274. Tom Fourcade left the meeting at 14.37pm.

## **PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

275. The meeting was closed to the public, including the press, and moved into private session at 14.37pm.

276. The meeting returned to public session at 14.40pm.

277. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Corporate Risk Register as at June 2024.

## **ITEM 17: ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT & UPDATED LOCAL CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

278. The Head of Governance introduced report PR23/24-47 and reminded members of the report content.

279. The Committee commented that:

- A lot of Officer time and effort was required to produce this report. Could it be slimmed down? Was it too in depth for an Authority of this size?
- Whilst some changes had been made to the Authorities audit arrangements it was still not compliant with CIPFA guidance. This seemed an explicit statement that further work would be done on this in future.
- The SDNPA was a relatively young organisation, that changed with the acquisition of SSCP and with the rise of Green Finance was on a trajectory to becoming a more complex organisation.

280. Members were advised:

- All National Park Authorities needed to produce Annual Government Statements similar to this, as did Local Government councils. The content was guided by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). While other authorities may structure it differently the content was broadly the same. Officers would consider whether it could be streamlined.
- The Committee considered the audit arrangements at its away day, but this was a matter for the Authority, not the Committee, to decide on. The intention was for this to come back before the Authority within the next year.

281. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Approved the Annual Governance Statement for 2023-24 (Appendix 1) to accompany the Authority's Statement of Accounts; and
2. Noted the updated Local Code of Corporate Governance (Appendix 2).

282. Annie Brown briefly left the meeting.

**ITEM 18: EXTERNAL AUDIT PLAN & INFORMING THE RISK ASSESSMENT 2023/24**

283. As apologies had been received from Grant Thornton it was agreed that the Committee would take questions on the two reports that could then be relayed to the external auditor.

284. The Committee commented that:

- Would like their views on the Authorities role in Green Finance as the SDNPA could be incurring long-term obligations and would like reassurance that the monies received were commensurate with the costs involved.
- There had been historic audit reporting delays. How was the Authority doing at meeting Grant Thorntons deadlines and are the auditors requirements realistic? Late delivery seemed to be a nationwide issue. Had the 31 May CIPFA deadline been met?
- Would like SDNPA Committee dates plotted onto the audit timeline on p285. Could the auditor be provided with these dates and be asked to work towards them.
- What procedures were in place to identify and prevent fraud that Members should be aware of aside from the internal audit processes, the anti-fraud strategy, whistleblowing policy and register of interests?

285. Members were advised:

- The 31 May deadline was for the Authority and had been met as it was a statutory requirement. The problems in the system were well reported and the original five-year contract for public sector audit report appointments, was not sufficient to enable them to obtain sufficient resource to meet their obligations.
- There were many financial processes in place to ensure risk was not a significant issue for the Authority including checks around employee payroll, suppliers and the processes in place at Brighton and Hove. The Internal Auditor has a counter fraud team to respond to any issues identified.

286. Amended recommendation: The Committee was recommended to:

- 1: ~~Agree the External Audit Plan~~ Delegate to the Chief Financial Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, to agree the External Audit Plan subject to satisfactory responses from Grant Thornton on any matters raised by the committee at the meeting.
- 2: Receive and consider Informing the Risk Assessment

287. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

- 1: Delegated to the Chief Financial Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, to agree the External Audit Plan subject to satisfactory responses from Grant Thornton on any matters raised by the committee at the meeting.
- 2: Received and considered Informing the Risk Assessment.

**ITEM 19: INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIONS**

288. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR23/24-49 and reminded members of the report content.

289. The Committee commented that:

- Pleased to see positive comments on capital accounting
- Partial assurance on the operating procedures at SSCP was disappointing but noted that a review of operating procedures at SSCP was due to come before Members at the NPA AGM.
- Had the RACI document been produced?
- Now the document identifying responsibilities had been produced was it working well?
- Where could further details on the numbers referenced in the Action Summary table be found?
- Would it be appropriate for Members to see the whole report at the pre-meeting to inform a deeper discussion of the issues?
- Had the HR Action on Declarations of Interest happened?

290. Members were advised:

- The RACI document had been produced and was in place.
- This audit had been helpful in highlighting some of the challenges experienced by the team at SSCP.
- An executive summary is provided to keep the report manageable. Only medium and high priority actions are detailed in it.
- Independent Members are provided with the whole report but it could be circulated to other Members if they wished to see it.
- The request to all staff to update declarations of interest had been sent.

## **PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

291. The meeting was closed to the public, including the press, and moved into private session at 15.14pm.

292. The meeting returned to public session at 15.25pm.

293. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted progress against the Internal Audit Strategy and Annual Plan (2023/24)
2. Approved the suggested amendment to the 2024/25 Annual Internal Audit Plan.

## **ITEM 20: INTERNAL AUDIT ANNUAL REPORT AND OPINION**

294. The Chief Internal Auditor introduced report PR23/24-50 and reminded members of the report content.

295. The Committee commentated that:

- There was growing complexity around Green Finance. Was the internal auditor equipped to address this area of work?

296. Members were advised:

- Green Finance would be more of an external audit role. If it becomes an area that the internal auditor needed to provide assurance on they would be able to provide that service.
- Green Finance was an evolving area of work. Internal checks were currently in place but Officers could take away the need for future audit planning on this area, both internally and externally.

297. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:



1. Noted the content of the Annual Audit Report (2023/24) and the Audit Opinion (2023/24); and
2. Was satisfied with the effectiveness of Internal Audit during 2023/24, taking into account the content of the Annual Audit Report

**ITEM 21: PART II MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES MEETING**

298. The Part II minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 29 February 2024 were approved as a correct record.
299. The Chair closed the meeting at 15.31pm.

**CHAIR**

