

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **17 October 2024**
By **Chief Executive Officer**
Title of Report **Chief Executive's Progress Report**
Note

Recommendation: **The Authority is recommended to note the report and progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report**

1. Summary and Background

1.1 This report provides an overview of some key workstreams that have been underway since the report to the 9 July 2024 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 As well as getting to grips with the new Government's missions and how they provide us with challenges and opportunities, particularly around water and food security, it's been a season of conferences recently. I am not talking about party political ones.

2.2 In the last few weeks, we have hosted the Big Chalk conference based at Winchester, more below, and the Friends / Societies of National Parks at Brighton. At the latter we had presence from Members and colleagues who took part in various panels, and I joined Campaign for National Parks (CNP) and a national landscape representative on a session on making best use of the new duty for all relevant authorities to 'seek to further the purposes' of the National Parks. The third conference I, with Laura Sercombe, accompanied some Members and Mo Findlay to the National Park UK conference titled '75 years of Landscapes for Everyone.'

2.3 It was truly galvanising to meet colleagues and Members from the National Park family and sponsors, together with a diverse group of speakers from different backgrounds and experiences of the countryside, including none at all. The presentations and Q&A sessions encouraged, cajoled and indeed reminded of us of our legal duty to ensure not just 'access for all' but actively seeking out how to provide a welcome to our very diverse society and visitors, to enjoy our precious landscapes in ways and language that truly does connect.

2.4 Holding the conference in Newcastle, making clear we are as relevant to people in cities as to any other part of the country, was a bold move. The urban safari on the first evening to the Glasshouse (Sage building) listening, in our silent disco headphones, to the story of the kittiwakes colonising the bridge and their birdsong, reminded all of the power of nature everywhere. I am not sure what the local population thought of us all snaking along the Tyne.

2.5 The trips available reflected the theme of inclusion, access and equitability. I walked a bit of the Hadrian's Path with Northumberland's lead ranger for the area and visited the site of the sycamore so tragically felled this time last year. What an atmosphere! It's clear much thought

has and continues to go into ever-increasing access for all. Whether it's elevated wheelchair accesses to the green roof of the Sill to really experience the sound and smell of the windswept countryside, provision of artistic activities for all ages, some benefitting from subsidised transport rates, or ensuring quality paths for a variety of abilities of walkers and those less mobile, the focus on access for all abilities, often co-designed with the users, was clear.

- 2.6 We need to challenge ourselves and pay attention to other voices more closely. I am glad, however, that it was recognised we are on a journey and have made some progress albeit we must engage with those we aspire to serve before we plan – as Vanessa quotes 'Nothing about us, Without Us'.
- 2.7 We will feed our learning into our discussions and strategy, especially with the engagement we are undertaking for the Partnership Management Plan and I am keen we take advantage of some of the new contacts made and listen and learn from others, as I know others present were. The Soil Collective who referenced our 'We Hear You Now' project, were full of good ideas and given the racial hatred evidenced by the removal of the QR code plaques relating to that project, the whole event was a timely reminder of our wider role in standing up to prejudice, racism and unequal access. This harks back to the zeal showed on the mass trespass at Kinder Scout in 1932, one of the foundation stones of the National Park movement and still as relevant today, albeit expressed in many different ways.
- 2.8 I have had various meetings with the Wildlife Trusts, Counties and Brighton and Hove Football Club, as well as other protected landscapes, and some of the workstreams arising feature below, or are leading on to joint bids for future funding.

3. Planning

- 3.1 Planning performance continues to be good, with all government targets being met.
- 3.2 We recovered the planning service in full from Horsham District Council from 1 October and our remaining host authorities are Chichester, East Hampshire, Lewes and Winchester. Also, from 1 October we have increased our pre-planning application fees. Pre-application planning discussions are important but we do need to ensure that we have better cost recovery of this important work. I am glad, however, that 100% affordable housing schemes and farming related applications will, as we seek to support both sectors, benefit from free pre-application advice.
- 3.3 In terms of the Local Plan Review, following recent Member workshops including a very interactive one at the beginning of the month, colleagues are preparing the documentation for a consultation on the Local Plan in early 2025. This is subject to approval at Planning Committee in November and at December's NPA. This is an exciting period as we keep the best of our award-winning Plan but evolve and improve to reflect progress made and changes since our 2019 Plan, particularly in relation to water and climate adaptation. As often with Local Plans much of public focus will be on new allocations of land for development but it is also important to note that the evolution of our Development Plan policies will have important impacts across the National Park, rather than on individual sites, and link with our corporate aims and wider ambitions.
- 3.4 I am delighted that over the summer the Authority won an award for our Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). The SPD was winner in the 'best plan' category at the Royal Town Planning Institute's South East of England awards. This SPD was a result of genuine officer and Member collaboration as the document was drawn up over multiple task and finish group meetings and interaction with Members. It is very pleasing to see this effort recognised. Staying with design, our Design Awards returned this year with the winners announced at a ceremony on 2 October. The quality of submissions was very high and over 1,500 members of the public voted for the 'People's Choice Award', which was fittingly a landscape ReNature project in the community – the Cockshut Stream restoration. My thanks go to all entrants, the judging panel (made up of Authority Members, our Design Review Panel and officers) for assessing and judging as well as all those involved behind the scenes making the event so special. All the shortlisted entries can be viewed here: [Shortlisted Designs: Celebrating Outstanding & Innovative Design \(southdowns.gov.uk\)](https://southdowns.gov.uk/celebrating-outstanding-innovative-design)

- 3.5 September's Planning Committee was one of the most complex we have had for some time. Contentious applications around enabling development, redevelopment of a former bus station site, a major housing site and holiday lets ensured a packed-out hall. Members also assessed other applications as well as determined the allocation of £1.9m of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and had an important discussion around the consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The meeting showcased the range of work planning covers in terms of applications, influencing policy and enabling good works by local communities and partners, to meet our purposes and duty as well as deliver on PMP outcomes. Members remained calm and professional throughout, despite a hall full of passion. Whilst difficult decisions were required, this is one way to show our principles of fairness and being evidence led, in a public way.
- 4. Progress of Existing Projects**
- 4.1 The **Big Chalk** is a big idea. Covering 19% of England's land area (including 26 Local Nature Recovery Strategy zones), it seeks to demonstrate that landscape connectivity is possible on a large scale. It gives life to the Making Space for Nature principles of more, bigger, better and joined-up spaces for nature at a scale greater than most conservation frameworks. It achieves this by championing, supporting and connecting partner-led activity on the ground. It aims to connect nature conservation and related activities across the calcareous (chalk and limestone) landscapes of southern England and increasing understanding and access to it for all.
- 4.2 The **Big Chalk Conference** was held in the South Downs, at the Winchester Science Park in September. It brought together a wide partnership of organisations involved in managing and enhancing chalk landscapes. Over 120 delegates from Protected Landscapes, government bodies, NGOs, green financiers, rural businesses and landowners attended over the three-day event. The focus was to talk about one of the most ambitious, large-scale nature recovery projects in England.
- 4.3 This event, organised by the National Landscapes Association, was lucky to have **Professor John Lawton** give the keynote speech. It had a clear message; 'Collaboration is at the heart of what we do and must continue to do – it's the key to achieving a truly connected, thriving natural landscape across England. The challenge is immense, but with bold, landscape-scale thinking, such as that embodied by Big Chalk, we can rise to meet it.'
- 4.4 The conference included field visits to a range of transformative nature recovery projects including one organised by our own Chris Fairbrother, to the National Trust's **Hinton Ampner** project focusing on a range of issues: how nature recovery can incorporate climate change and the role of green finance. Other field trips included the **Great Bustard** project on Salisbury Plain, chalk stream restoration in the Hambleden Valley and **Pewsey Downs farmers' group**.
- 4.5 The final day was a series of workshops ranging from how Big Chalk can support the 30 by 30 target and Local Nature Recovery Strategies to monitoring chalk grassland, (which Jan Knowlson presented at and helped to lead). James Winkworth sat on the expert panel "Making Big Chalk happen, how do we make the vision a reality?" providing fundraising insight, alongside the Authority's future CEO, Siôn McGeever.
- 4.6 The take homes were that nature recovery needs big ambition and collaboration and partnership, within and across sectors and organisations. Cath Jackson and Jan Knowlson sit on Big Chalk working groups, which will be looking at how to build on the conference's aspirations. Exciting times ahead.
- 4.7 **Cultural Heritage Projects** - Highlights from cultural heritage projects include the progression of the pilot with Sussex Heritage Trust and Weald and Downland Living Museum to provide heritage craft taster experiences for 27 young people aged 16 to 25 years old, with ongoing support provided to enable participants to secure bursaries for training and be matched to apprenticeships. Heritage crafts are essential and there is a recognised risk that heritage crafts are in decline due to a lack of opportunities to support young people into careers. Prioritising engagement with young people, particularly from areas of social deprivation), the

pilot, is ensuring we have a workforce ready to maintain the future of our protected landscapes and built heritage.

- 4.8 The **Fair Game** project uses the bio-archaeological story of fallow deer to engage partners and the wider public with deer management. It continues to deliver pop-up events and test-and-trial activities. In September, *Fair Game* featured at the Stansted Park South Downs Festival, where there was a distinct lack of awareness about both deer numbers and impacts among the people we spoke to across the weekend event. The event also featured a recreation of an Unmaking – the medieval process of butchering a deer and distributing the meat across a community, which we can see traces of in the archaeological record. The message chimes strongly with the contemporary challenge we face around both deer impacts and food poverty. The project team also collaborated on two further funding bids to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) – one ('Game Changing') will analyse the diet and health of past and present deer populations to understand how they are adapting to landscape change impact on agriculture and woodland regeneration; a second ('Valuing Venison as a One Health Solution') will be expanding on work by the Fair Game project team and Natural England to resolve barriers to venison entering the food chain through schools, social care and hospitals, as well as looking at an expanded market around food charities. Both bids are possible thanks to our work with the University of Exeter, and both will contribute to the key priorities nationally for deer management.
- 4.9 **Youth Engagement Project: Discover the Downs** - This is a Defra funded project running until March 2025. The grant will help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to experience the wonders of our most beautiful landscapes and offers fully-funded visits to the SDNP for schools with over 30% Pupil Premium.
- 4.10 The project officer, Gina Mitchell, is now in post. We launched the project at the start of the school term with a press notice and direct communication to all eligible schools across our region. There has been considerable interest, and we are already taking bookings for nature connection days and dark night sky sessions from schools which would not have had the opportunity to engage with us without this funding. Memorandums of Understanding have been signed with the Sustainability Centre to deliver the residential component of the project and Goodwood Education Trust to deliver the farm visits. Bookings for these visits are also now underway.
- 4.11 We continue to deliver year four of **the FiPL Programme** working towards the March 2025 deadline. So far, our Local Assessment Panel has approved 33 projects for 24/25 totalling £982,634.38. This leaves a total of £43,114.62 still to allocate. We are currently working through expressions of interest to develop and approve projects to deliver this. Alongside, we are also working with live projects, some of which include extensive building works and one introducing beavers, to ensure they are finished, and claims are processed before the end of the programme.
- 4.12 In May, Defra announced that the funding for Protected Landscapes staff time, would be continued to September 2025 to enable the FiPL programme to be closed. In addition, further funding for FiPL staff time, to March 2027, has been secured to optimise the effectiveness and take-up of Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes. The Farming Team continue to work with Defra to define this work and ensure that farmers and land managers in the SDNP are receiving quality support and advice.
- 4.13 In August, Defra announced further updates as the ELM schemes are developed. From 2024, the **Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)** has been expanded and now comprises 102 actions. This includes 20 new options with payments for precision farming, agroforestry and more actions for tenants on short-term contracts. We are still awaiting announcements from Defra on Countryside Stewardship (CS), including we hope how farmers will be rewarded for collaborating their efforts at a landscape scale.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 It was a busy summer at **Seven Sisters** with a notable increase in visitor numbers in the park and using facilities at Exceat. Both the Visitor Centre and Food & Beverage outlets traded

positively, thanks to decent weather over the July and August and an increase in visitors using the visitor centre. The increased numbers did bring some challenges, particularly around coach parking demand and limited weekend car parking capacity, but other on-site facilities coped well. We are also nearing completion on the improved wastewater arrangements and reed beds to eliminate our emissions into the water system.

- 5.2 A successful events programme hosted a range of in-house and private hire events which included nature-themed talks and tours, self-led young people activities and local artist exhibitions and workshops, alongside hosting corporate volunteering and youth action days supporting our conservation work. The park also welcomed three new visitor experience volunteers who have taken to litter picking around Exceat and along the concrete path, making a huge impact on the levels of litter left in the park by visitors.
- 5.3 It proved to be a good first summer for bookings in the holiday cottages and camping barn. Following the conclusion of the management contract, a steady stream of bookings across all three cottages have seen a mix of visitors enjoy the location, offer and welcome provided by our agents, Cuckmere Cottages & Camping. Feedback has been very positive. The smaller cottage has been the most popular but with considerable interest growing in bookings for the larger two cottages for autumn, over the Christmas period and into 2025. At the camping barn, which has only welcomed groups this summer, a growing interest in bookings from education and recreation has seen bookings for Duke of Edinburgh, home school, and inner-city outreach groups all using the facilities and again providing positive feedback and booking enquiries.
- 5.4 In terms of delivering landscape conservation as part of our Countryside Stewardship Agreement we have continued with a seasonal programme of grazing with sheep, cows and ponies across the park which has led to encouraging signs of improved chalk grassland, species and habitats as part of our nature recovery programme. Surveys were also undertaken at the two dew ponds restored last year that demonstrate encouraging signs of wildlife use. Capital investment funded the repair of the sluice gates that should lead to improved ways of managing water levels within the wetland area.
- 5.5 The **South Downs Climate Action Network on Knowledge Hub** featured and was launched at the **All Parish meeting on 2 October**. The site enables community climate and environment groups to share best practice, links and toolkits as well as ask advice from the knowledge and experience within the groups across the South Downs. It is also a space for community groups to share events and newsletters. We now want to encourage as many people as possible to join the Knowledge Hub site, and add to it, so that it becomes the tool for communities across the National Park and beyond our borders. We will also be launching a new interactive **Climate Action Map** to help people see where other groups are or find out if there is a local group in their area. Support to promote the knowledge hub and map as wide as possible is welcomed.
- 5.6 Since my last report, the **Income Generation Team** has made significant progress, doubling its pledged and secured income to £684k, with more than £2.3 million in outstanding asks and applications. The pledged income includes new support from a Major Donor, a Corporate Partnership, and a successful bid for the Natural England Environment Investment Readiness Fund. The latter is a £100k grant that will advance our work in Nature-based Solutions (NbS – often referred to as Green Finance) programme, discussed later in the agenda.
- 5.7 The £2.3 million in outstanding asks includes the previously featured £1.7 million bid for the "Downs to the Sea" project. Over the summer, we hosted a site visit for this application, attended by two members of the NHLF committee. The feedback was highly encouraging, with our guests praising the "strength of the partnership". This is a promising sign, and we hope to share positive news on this matter with you very soon.

6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 The last quarter has seen some high-profile media work – both proactive and reactive. A highlight of our summer media work was the **BBC regional Special for the 75th Anniversary**. Many months in the making, most of this was shot live in the National Park and featured a number of different aspects of our work including our rangers' work on the ground,

our work with schools and the vital role played by volunteers. I enjoyed a live interview in the setting sunshine at the top of Butser Hill with Rose O’Neil from (CNP) advising on our (good) progress on ReNature work and ensuring people can connect with nature.

- 6.2 The success of our **ReNature Campaign** was covered by the BBC and a number of regional titles, the *Your National Park* film trail along the South Downs Way was also picked up by a range of titles and our Design Awards attracted positive media coverage.
- 6.3 A key part of our media work is how we manage more difficult stories – our Planning Committee on the former Lewes Bus Station site involved careful management to ensure the correct information was shared, with emotions running high in some parts of the community. In the last few weeks, we have been dealing with the difficult damage to the **We Hear You Now trail**, showcasing wonderful stories by women writers of colour inspired by the special landscapes of this National Park. This attack on the trail and the removal of the plaques, at a time of heightened racial tension across the UK, required sensitive and careful management. We are very grateful to Sussex Police for their advice and support as we set out to publicly stand in support of the writers and to being a National Park for All. It was a good reminder that sometimes our most successful press work is not always counted in column inches.
- 6.4 We have had a busy summer of events from ranger pop-ups at key hotspots and the urban fringe, to our attendance at a variety of partner events. In total this year we have run or attended over 69 events. For the first time ever, we attended **Jalsa Salana**, a festival of some 45,000 people from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. This unique event was an opportunity to engage with hundreds of people from many parts of the country, including London, Birmingham, Germany and even Mauritius! We also ran a large number of events to enable people to experience nature, from guided walks at Seven Sisters Country Park, to bat walks delivered by the Heathlands Reunited team on our wonderful heathlands.
- 6.5 Content, we know, is key to keeping our audiences engaged and ensuring that our platforms are places for voices from all parts of our communities. In September we supported a podcasting event run by The Tremula Network. This experienced group of podcasters work to engage new voices to bring fresh perspectives on nature and the outdoors. In addition to running a workshop in the landscape during the event, we sponsored five places for podcasters/content creators who would otherwise not have been able to attend. This is an important part of our Voices engagement programme and to supporting new voices for and about the National Park.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 As with previous reports, my aim has been to provide an overview of the highlights of the period since my report to the 9 July 2024 NPA, leaving Members to follow up any issues on which they would like more detail, or would like to discuss further at the Meeting.

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Appendices	None
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Countryside Policy and Management; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services, Business Service Manager
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	N/A