

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **10 December 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 17 October 2024 NPA.

2. Introduction

2.1 As I write this, I am coming to the end of my third day in the job. I already knew that the SDNPA was doing great things, but I'm already really blown away by the amazing and diverse work that is going on and delighted to see that it is getting recognition far and wide.

2.2 I want to take this opportunity to commend Tim Slaney and the senior team for the amazing job they have done to maintain momentum and provide steady leadership over the last 12 months. I feel like I'm entering an organisation that is full of passion and ambition that is undimmed by the period of transition it has been going through. And also, to thank all those who have been working to prepare me before my official start and for organising such a comprehensive induction programme.

2.3 It is no secret that we are facing a tight fiscal reality, and that the challenges ahead are significant. But I also know that SDNPA is in a really strong position to rise to those. I'm now really looking forward to getting stuck in, to working with you all, and to building on the great work already underway.

2.4 Tim and I present this report to you jointly on this occasion. Much of the first person below is in Tim's voice as it predates me.

3. Planning

3.1 I am pleased that Planning **performance** continues to be good. Our record at appeal is particularly strong at present with 88% of appeals being dismissed in the financial year to date.

3.2 November's Planning Committee endorsed the **Local Plan Review** proposed Regulation 18 consultation which falls to be considered at this 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 nature, water and climate

adaptation. Much of the public focus will be on new allocations of land for development but it is also important to note that our Development Plan policies will have important impacts across the National Park, and link with our corporate aims and wider ambitions.

- 3.3 I mentioned before that in 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. I am pleased to say that this SPD has now been **shortlisted for a national RTPI award**. As one of ten shortlisted projects the odds are not in our favour but being shortlisted represents national recognition of the quality of our work.
- 3.4 Members will recall that we are the only National Park Authority to have the **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)**, a vital source of income to support partners in delivering projects for nature recovery, climate action and access for all on the ground. The last set of payments were made in October, and I am pleased to say that £213k was disbursed to 18 Parish and Town Councils. This money is in addition to the £1.9m in CIL funding that September’s Planning Committee approved for projects across the SDNP that benefit the environment and people.
- 3.5 Members will recall the **Phoenix development in Lewes**. This is for the redevelopment of a brownfield site for a mixed-use development led by 685 new homes. This represents the largest residential led application submitted in a British National Park. Following February Planning Committee, significant progress has been made to address the need for 30% affordable homes, flood defence systems and highways matters (for example National Highways have now withdrawn their objection). Subject to the satisfactory resolution of the few remaining matters, I would expect the planning permission for this truly innovative scheme to be issued early in the New Year.
- 4. Progress of Existing Projects**
- 4.1 The SDNPA **Outdoor Learning Grant** is a highly effective mechanism for engaging schools with quality outdoor learning within the South Downs National Park. Thanks to generous contributions from the SDNP Trust we have enabled 7849 pupils from 141 schools to access the National Park this financial year. All of these schools have over 10% of their pupils eligible for Free School Meals ensuring that this grant is targeting those schools who have pupils with greatest economic disadvantage.
- 4.2 This year I am delighted we are able to offer all schools with 10% or more Free School Meals a discounted offer for coach travel through our partnership with National Express Transport Solutions. This offers a fixed rate of £295 for a coach seating up to 60 pupils for any school visiting the SDNP on a school trip ensuring that the Outdoor Learning grant can go even further.
- 4.3 The **Innovate UK project** has been working with Local Authority Partners in East and West Sussex. All local authority climate action plans and strategies in these areas have been mapped, alongside other stakeholder, parish and community action plans. We now have 79 plans mapped onto the OnePlanet platform. We are now progressing with training sessions for all County Councils. Now we can have all this data mapped onto the platform, we are starting to hold analysis and insights sessions, to identify synergies, gaps and opportunities for shared work programmes. I am so pleased the overall response continues to be positive.
- 4.4 I have mentioned before the **Knowledge Hub**. This aims to create links between existing community climate and environment groups to support community resilience, share best practice and identify opportunities to create larger scale groups and projects to tackle climate change at the local level. It is also a space to ask questions, reducing duplication and facilitating sharing expertise and experience. Since its launch in October the Knowledge Hub

group has nearly 50 members in its first month, which is great. We will keep promoting it and adding useful resources, to make it an invaluable resource for our communities.

- 4.5 I am delighted that **Energise South Downs** have been nominated for the **Climate Action award at the CPRE Hampshire Countryside Awards 2024** for their community engagement through their Future Energy Landscape Workshops, which we have funded. We have supported this group from an early stage and are currently exploring ways to support the pipeline of community energy projects they have been developing, with at least one of the projects being funded by CIL this year. They will find out if they have won at an awards ceremony on the 10 December 2024.
- 4.6 A funding award provided our contribution towards **pond construction at Blacknest Fields** which got underway in July. So now we have a pond in its infancy, still fragile and forming day by day. Whilst not completely solving water scarcity, it is a small but essential drop in the landscape.
- 4.7 It was great to be recognised when the **Blacknest Fields Nature Recovery Project** won the Project in a Protected Landscape Award in the **Hampshire Countryside Awards 2025**. Congratulations to all the team behind the project. Here is what the judges said: *'Excellent project, which promotes wide community engagement, will transform habitat to the benefit of local flora and fauna and have a lasting impact on biodiversity. It is also an excellent example of how collaboration with partners can bring real value and of how working with young people (through schools and youth groups) can enhance the legacy of a project.'* We will now be put forward for the Hampshire Choice awards which is an online vote that is open to all. The Awards Ceremony will be held on the 10 December.
- 4.8 Furthering our links with academia the SDNPA and Lancaster University are partners in a project led by the Peak District NPA, to analyse historic maps to better understand landscape change over time. **The Landscape Change and Conservation with MapReader** project uses software to analyse fascinating nineteenth century and twentieth century Ordnance Survey maps. It measures and quantifies past landscapes, with an emphasis on built and natural environments, particular to specific park landscapes. The aim is for the data generated to be Open Source and inform conservation and management strategies. The focus will be on understanding changes to field boundaries over time. The technology enables us to assess habitat types to better understand future landscape change and inform strategies.
- 4.9 **The Fair Game** project all about deer and venison won the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) Archaeological Achievement Award in the sustainability category. *Fair Game* has used the bio-archaeological and cultural story of fallow deer to ignite partnerships and conversations about deer management today, and has included collaboration with the Natural England Sussex Woods Protected Sites Strategy (PPS) to promote venison supply to food charities, recreating the Medieval model of social distribution across communities. The project animation can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/Virtuous Venison>. This project attracted great attention at a recent farming conference I presented at recently.
- 4.10 **We Hear You Now** will feature in the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) Winter 2024 journal. Co-written by Anooshka Rawden and Emily Summers-Mileman, the article explored ways of generating interpretation from communities themselves, as well as sharing some key lessons learned from the process. The AHI is a professional body in Britain and Ireland for those involved in engaging people with natural and cultural heritage.

5. Corporate Update

- 5.1 The recent **budget** announcements for the new financial year will increase our costs for Employers National Insurance. This puts additional pressure on our resources for 2025-26, on top of inflation increasing. There may however be possibilities for capital funding from Defra. Related, the **Income Generation** team has now secured just under £2.5 million (up

from £684k at the time of the last report), with over £800,000 in potential funding currently in the pipeline. Huge congratulations to those involved from across the organisation. A significant contributor to this success is the recent approval of our £1.7 million bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for **Downs to the Sea**. This milestone, which occurred shortly after the last CEO report, is one I am delighted to formally record.

- 5.2 This transformative investment will restore wetlands across the South Downs National Park, enhancing biodiversity, strengthening climate resilience, and raising awareness of the critical role water plays in our lives. Key sites, such as RSPB Pulborough Brooks and Pagham Harbour, will benefit from restoration efforts, alongside the creation of a new network of ponds. Developed by the National Park and led by the South Downs Trust, this partnership project includes organisations such as the RSPB and Western Sussex Rivers Trust.
- 5.3 The initiative will also actively engage local communities through volunteering, social prescribing, and educational activities. Creative projects, spearheaded by Writing Our Legacy, will connect diverse communities to the area's natural heritage, ensuring the preservation and appreciation of water environments for future generations. This success is the result of a collaborative effort across the Park Authority. I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved, with special recognition to Michael Edmonds and Natacha Bricks-Yonow for their outstanding contributions in securing this bid.
- 5.4 To celebrate the 75th Anniversary of National Parks, the SDNPA and the SDNP Trust are collaborating to deliver a **School reNature Grant scheme** in and around the SDNP. Schools can apply for up to £1,000 of funding to make improvements for nature within their school grounds. A total of £75,000 is being made available by the South Downs National Park Authority and the SDNP Trust to support projects that enhance biodiversity and create vibrant green spaces for learning and wildlife.
- 5.5 This funding is available on a first-come, first-served basis or until 1 July 2025. This supports our work in National Parks for All, Climate Action and Nature Recovery. The grant will be launched in December to coincide with our Anniversary celebrations and will be administered by the SDNP Trust.
- 5.6 Not often one gets excited by sewers, but I am delighted that the **Sewage Treatment Plant at SSCP** was commissioned on 18 November, ensuring our water management for the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Country Park is safe and future proofed. Related, final works of the **Wetlands Enhancement Project** are underway with the last ditch being created and works to complete the new dew pond in the dry valley supporting different habitats. The piece of work will be the final phase to restore the Exceat bridge sluice gate this autumn / winter.
- 5.7 The last event of 2024 at the SSCP is the third annual **Christmas Fair** on the weekend of 8/9 December in partnership with onsite Saltmarsh Farmhouse, offering 40 artists and makers stalls alongside regular local products and seasonal treats available. Thank you if you went along.
- 5.8 The first six months of **Cuckmere Cottages & Camping** management contract shows very positive performance with overall cottage occupancy at 41% and very positive feedback, and more importantly repeat bookings for 2025. 18 group bookings for the camping barn have been catered for, ranging from one night to a week. Audiences included Duke of Edinburgh Awards, home schools and educational outreach charities such as The Garden Classroom, and again we have repeat bookings. Well done all involved in this.
- 5.9 At the end of October, we created a climate-positive **viticulture grant fund** of just under £70,000 to support an industry expected to grow by 50% this decade in West Sussex in the most environmentally conscious way possible. This SDNPA led initiative was funded in partnership with four rural west Sussex District Councils, WSCC and the SDNPA, with the South Downs National Park Trust offering to administer the fund. Applications close in

January, a funding panel will appraise submissions in Q4, looking for those proposals with the biggest environmental impact, value for money and innovation. Example proposals may include water conservation and quality measures, reducing pesticide use, energy initiatives, biodiversity gain and more. Wine production whilst seeking to further our purposes must be a good thing.

- 5.10 Our South Downs **business network** now comprises over 400 organisations, with nearly 700 Instagram followers. 27 businesses have done the Green South Downs Sustainability Certification, and Chichester District Council recently announced funding to support a number of businesses through the programme in their district. Excluding Nature based Solutions, **the Rural Economy Thrive team** has generated income this financial year of £124,000 through a mix of sources; Corporate Donations Packages, Partner support and the Visitor Giving scheme. The Thrive team have been active in the Fair Game project referred to above, supporting the supply side of wild venison. Through events we have worked with Sussex Grazed to develop a Browsing Box (meat-box) scheme to support Deer Managers with a direct route to market and worked with pie manufacturer Mud Foods to incorporate the 'Virtuous Venison' branding to promote their Wild Venison Pie.

6. Media and Communications

- 6.1 Autumn has been a strong period for our **media**, despite, sadly, little focus being on nature and the environment. In early October we released our story about nature recovery on the River Meon. This included the resurgence of the much-loved water vole since our release programme and other key species such as the marsh harrier and the otter, with over 200 pieces of media coverage nationally and locally, including The Guardian and BBC online.
- 6.2 The Downs to the Sea announcement attracted wide coverage locally and regionally, including BBC South East. The latest Trees for the Downs release went out and has already been picked up by the Telegraph, i-paper, BBC and other media outlets.
- 6.3 As always some of our most significant media work was managing incorrect or difficult media stories including continued work to manage the racially motivated theft of the We Hear You Now plaques, Local Plan proposed housing allocations and queries around a lack of progress on the buildings affected by the Midhurst fire.
- 6.4 These have been interesting times for **social media**. X has lost over 2 million followers, and this is reflected on a smaller scale by a drop in our X audience of nearly 500 followers against over 24,000 we still have. There has been a significant shift towards the newest social media platform, Bluesky, who gained 1m followers in one day. They now have gone from 9m in September to 19m in October. We have started an SDNPA Bluesky channel last week and already have 600 followers.
- 6.5 Our video contact continues to attract new audiences, and our YouTube channel is about to reach 2,000 followers.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 As with previous reports, the aim has been to provide a necessary snapshot of some of the highlights of the period since the report to the 17 October 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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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