

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING 19 SEPTEMBER 2024

Held at the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, Midhurst at 1.00pm

Present: Tim Burr, Peter Diplock, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Steven Ridgeon and Vicki Wells.

Co-opted Members of the Committee: OlaOlu Adedayo and Arthur Sloman.

Independent Members of the Committee: Catriona Aves.

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

SDNPA Officers: Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Mike Hughes (Director of Planning (Interim)), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Mark Alden (Nature-based Solutions Manager), Bruno Aveiro (Health and Safety Officer), Amanda Elmes (Learning, Outreach and Volunteer Lead), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Liz Gent (Project Management Lead), Rebecca Glasby (Performance and Learning Officer), Nick Heasman (Countryside and Policy Manager), Hayley Madgwick (Procurement Manager), Nigel Manvel (Chief Finance Officer), Vicky Paterson (HR Manager), Anne Rehill (Performance and Project Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance), Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services) and James Winkworth (Head of Marketing and Income Generation).

Also Attended by: Rob Hindle (Rural Solutions), Francis Hampden and Nick Jones (Glynde Estate).

OPENING REMARKS

309. The Chair opened the meeting.

310. 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.

311. The Chair welcomed Mark Potter and Arthur Sloman as new members of the committee. She also welcomed Laura Sercombe, the new Director of Landscape and Strategy, Rob Hindle of Rural Solutions and Francis Hampden and Nick Jones of the Glynde Estate.

ITEM 1: APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

312. Apologies were received from Tom Fourcade and Morris Findley.

ITEM 2: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

313. There were no declarations of interest.

ITEM 3: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE HELD ON 27 JUNE 2024

314. The minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 27 June 2024 were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

- Page 9 Minute 243 should read '*how this would be mitigated*' not '*how this would be litigated*'.

- Page 17 Minute 272 sixth bullet point should read 'East Sussex County Council' not 'West Sussex County Council'.

ITEM 4: UPDATES ON PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DECISIONS

315. The Chalk Coast National Nature Reserve (NNR) was still awaiting approval by the Natural England board which had been expected to occur in November. The application had been submitted but there had been a delay in the process.

ITEM 5: URGENT MATTERS

316. There were none.

ITEM 6: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

317. There was none.

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

318. Members were asked if anyone wished to raise any point of accuracy in the part II minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 June 2024 at Agenda Item 19. No Member wished to raise any points of accuracy.
319. Members were asked to consider the exclusion of the public, including the press, from the meeting for Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 17.
320. The Deputy Monitoring Officer asked Members to consider whether, in respect of Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 17, 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 I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, being information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person including the Authority and that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exempt information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. It 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.
321. **RESOLVED:** The meeting would be moved into private session at the appropriate point to consider Appendix 3 of Agenda Item 17 and that the public, including the press, would be excluded from the meeting at that point.

ITEM 8: CHAIR UPDATE

322. The Chair provided a verbal update:
- An update had been received from the external auditors, but it had been received too late for inclusion on the agenda for this meeting but would be circulated to all members following the conclusion of this meeting. Any questions arising from the paper would be considered at the next meeting of the committee.
 - Noted that SDNPA Member Jerry Pett had requested that a matter in relation to Mill Lane, Droxford be considered by the committee. To ensure Members were equipped to consider the matter, the Chair had requested Officers prepare some briefing materials on this item.

- Thanked Members for their work at the Partnership Management Plan workshop during the morning.

ITEM 9: GLYNDE ESTATE WHOLE ESTATE PLAN

323. The Nature-based Solutions Manager introduced report PR24/25-01 and reminded members of the report content.
324. Rob Hindle of Rural Solutions addressed the committee.
325. The Committee commented that:
- They thanked the Estate for their efforts in developing this plan.
 - This was an excellent and exciting Whole Estate Plan (WEP), very impressed with the generational vision. The collaborative work between the Estate, the SDNPA and stakeholders should give the committee confidence that the WEP process was working well.
 - The site visit had been very beneficial for Members in appreciating the challenges and ambition of the Estate.
 - The detail of the proposed projects contained within the plan helped to demonstrate how the wider objectives and vision of the Estate would be delivered.
 - Liked how the WEP had been laid out as it was clear and easy to read.
 - With regard to Climate Regulation and Carbon Storage, the aim seemed to be to drive towards net zero for the Estate, but not at this stage to enter the market in carbon credits to offset elsewhere. Was this correct?
 - The WEP contained some great ideas on evolving farming practices to reduce the impact on rivers and watercourses. Were any proactive interventions planned by the Estate to improve or ensure the quality of the water?
 - There were some excellent targets in the WEP. How would the Authority be kept informed on their progress?
326. Members were advised:
- The plan was to decarbonise the Estate first before looking to monetise. There was a carbon pathway to work towards net zero.
 - There are proactive interventions planned, such as cover cropping on the downland to mitigate runoff into the Ouse and the Glynde tributary. There are a number of mains boreholes for South East Water. There is more work to be done with South East Water on the management of the catchment area. Methods of farming will include less ploughing to improve water quality.
 - The Authority was in a time of transition around its annual WEP monitoring, and would soon be adopting the Survey 123 system which was a landowner-led monitoring system which had been adopted elsewhere in the Authority for projects such as Trees for the Downs and Beelines.
327. **RESOLVED:** The Committee endorsed the Glynde Estate Whole Estate Plan at Appendix I.

ITEM 10: SOUTH DOWNS PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN - REVIEW

328. The Performance and Project Manager introduced report PR24/25-02 and reminded members of the report content.
329. The Chair tabled revised recommendations which were resolved.
330. The Committee commented that:

- The dedication to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the report was very positive and it was good to make the process fun and engaging for young people.
- They were keen to hear feedback from the events planned.
- Had Officers' other duties been scaled back to enable them to dedicate the time necessary to do the amount of work required of them?

331. Members were advised:

- The review process was being built into existing meetings as far as practicable, both internally and externally, to minimise the extra workload. Most Officers' objectives included supporting the work of the Management Plan. External consultants had been engaged to carry out an evaluation of delivery against the existing plan and others to do the bulk of the work in terms of engagement with partners to develop a new plan. This work was both exciting and engaging and Officers were keen to help develop the aspirational ambition for the organisation.

332. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Approved the proposed approach to the review of the Partnership Management Plan for the South Downs.

The Committee recommended to the NPA:

2. To establish the Partnership Management Plan Steering Group with the terms of reference set out in Appendix 3;
3. That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to select and appoint the chair and members of the Steering Group and to determine the basis of those appointments including the terms and conditions and the payment of any allowance;
4. That authority be delegated to the Chief Executive to issue any notices required by Section 66 of the Environment Act 1995, at the appropriate point in the process; and,
5. To agree that when issuing the notice to review the Partnership Management Plan, as required by Section 66 of the Environment Act 1995, the SDNPA send with the notice a revised draft Partnership Management Plan, to be approved at a future meeting of the NPA, rather than a scoping report and a copy of the existing Partnership Management Plan.

ITEM 11: ENVIRONMENTAL LAND ACQUISITION FRAMEWORK

333. The Head of Income Generation and Marketing and Countryside and Policy Manager introduced report PR24/25-03 and reminded members of the report content.

334. The Committee commented that:

- Was the Fuling Mill opportunity still available or had it been lost?
- Welcomed the two-stage process. The process appeared robust and should not act as a block to the acquisition of land but equip the Authority to address questions around land acquisition sensibly and confidently.
- The Campaign for National Parks had wanted to see more National Park ownership of land within the Parks and this was an area of interest nationally.
- Keen that this doesn't become a file that sits on a shelf. Could a future iteration include more references to the Partnership Management Plan as part of the decision making?
- Would the Authority be seeking to actively obtain gifts of land in the context of income generation, rather than just considering passively receiving them?

- Good for Officers to be equipped with a firm position so they would be able to answer questions.
- What learning had been received from other places during the design process?
- Regarding first phase principles, we have learned that ongoing maintenance can often be the highest cost on a project. Should consideration be given to setting a timescale on affordability that includes costs over the lifetime of the site?

335. Members were advised:

- The funding opportunity for Fuling Mill had passed and the project was not currently under consideration.
- Legacy giving was encouraged through the Trust, but gifts of land were more delicate with important sensitivities, liabilities and risks. Officers on the ground were alert to opportunities and this framework would equip them with a process to use when opportunities arose.
- The Authority's application to become a responsible body would enable it to create Conservation Covenant Agreements which would offer legal protection outside of section 106 agreements.
- The land assessment had come from the work of the Wildlife Trust and also incorporated learning from others experiences on the ground.
- As well as considering liabilities the Authority also needed to consider issues around delivery. The work at Seven Sisters Country Park had been very informative and given the Authority excellent practical experience. Timescales could be incorporated into the framework.

336. **RESOLVED:** The Committee recommended the NPA approve the Environmental Land Acquisition Framework as set out at Appendix I.

ITEM 12: UPDATE ON PROGRESS AGAINST VOLUNTEER REVIEW CHANGE PROGRAMME

337. The Learning, Outreach and Volunteer lead introduced report PR24/25-04 and reminded members of the report content

338. The Committee commented that:

- Pleased that the review had included the financial benefit. Opportunities from the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme looked to be a great method of engaging young people and helping them to see development pathways.
- Good to clarify the distinction between private benefit (mental health and health and wellbeing) and landscape benefit.
- It would be good to see some quantification at a future stage with regard to actual and desired volunteer numbers, as well as aggregate cost to the Authority and diversity to measure what impact the changes have achieved. Increasing volunteer diversity was an important driver for the review.
- Volunteering opportunities are a great tool to drive engagement and there is a story here that deserves a wider audience.
- How is the Authority tackling the challenges of the digital divide?
- The engagement with the DoE scheme is great, has any consideration been given to widening that out to other youth organisations such as the Scouts and Guides?
- Could more detail be provided on the career progression pathway.

- Was there an opportunity to offer volunteer sessions at job centres as part of the government mission to help those with mental health issues get back into the workplace? Good to demonstrate the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering.

339. Members were advised:

- The Youth Action Programme has increased youth (under 25) volunteering from 4% to 13%. Also working proactively with partner organisations to offer flexible opportunities, including corporate volunteering and family volunteering days, to widen the opportunities for participation and broaden the volunteer demographic. Core volunteers were still part of the volunteering picture but were no longer the whole picture.
- Officers were keen to produce an annual review using the Investors in Volunteering standard to pick up on demographic indicators and see how the SDNPA was progressing, and to bring to the committee once the change process had been completed and the data was available.
- The Authority did not underestimate the challenge of embracing a digital system and the review panel had been really helpful in facilitating this. There was a plan in place to support those not able to engage digitally so that it should not be a barrier to participation.
- The 11-16 programme was viewed as a feeder into the 16-25 Youth Action Programme. The volunteer programme sat alongside a careers programme. A pilot programme was scheduled to roll out in the west in a few weeks' time, with a view to running across the Park. The program was not restricted to the DoE scheme but there were limited options to volunteer under 18.
- The Authority had a commitment to Pathways to Green Careers and there was a broad school engagement programme. A new cohort of youth ambassadors had been recruited and the Authority was working with previous youth ambassadors to serve as coaches and mentors to assist with entering into green careers. The details of the apprenticeship program would be covered under agenda item 13.
- The Authority had a direct engagement programme for groups and individuals with specific health and wellbeing needs. The Authority was working with Mind and had demonstrated a pathway into regular volunteering through that route. The volunteering social return of investment in the 'A people-powered National Park' report states that £945,000 of wellbeing benefit was created each year through the volunteering programme.

340. **RESOLVED:** The Committee noted the progress made in delivering the Volunteer Review recommendations.

341. The meeting adjourned for a short comfort break.

342. Peter Diplock left the meeting.

ITEM 13: ANNUAL HUMAN RESOURCES AND HEALTH & SAFETY REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2023-2024

343. The Human Resources Manager introduced report PR24/25-05 and reminded members of the report content.

344. The Committee commented that:

- Had the number of FTE staff increased over the last year? There appeared to be an inconsistency between the figure on the Authority website and the figure listed in the report.
- Leadership coaching was very important and Members were keen that the leadership program for the Operational Management Team (OMT) be ongoing.

- Would be good to complete a refresh on the inclusivity training for Members.
- What was the distinction between an incident and an accident?
- Thanks to Officers for their efforts in the Chief Executive recruitment process.
- Was the drop in regular contact between Members and Officers identified in the staff survey something Members should be considering?
- What was the purpose of asking staff about contact with Members given that they were not line managers for those officers?
- Should the disappointment with the diversity numbers for staff recruitment be set against the figures within the National Park rather than against national figures?
- There were strong arguments that a National Park should reflect the national picture and that raised challenges when the local recruitment pool was not reflective of the national recruitment pool.
- The diversity of staff did not reflect the diversity of the volunteer demographic. Could the recruitment net be cast wider to broaden the pool of potential applicants?
- Great to see the overall improvement in the staff survey engagement and positivity of staff about their employment. Would there be annual staff surveys going forward? A quarterly or bi-annual pulse survey could be worth consideration.
- 100% white British candidates appointed was unacceptable and the Authority needed to take ownership and responsibility for that. The language in adverts was important and should be active, not just welcoming applications but actively seeking. With regard to interview panels, if we don't have sufficiently diverse staff, could use be made of external individuals to ensure interview panels are welcoming to all? Did the Authority use a blind application process? How was the Authority working to remove unconscious bias from the recruitment process?
- It would be helpful in future to have some commentary to better understand the reasons for any discrepancies, such as the gender split, both amongst Officers and Members, to avoid speculation in discussions.
- Was geography a potential barrier to recruitment? Was there scope for the regional offices be better used to increase access?
- It was great to see the increased number of training days provided as that could be an easy target when dealing with financial pressures.
- The number of incidents reported appeared to have plateaued. Were there any further initiatives that could be tried to further increase safety?
- Were the concerns raised in the staff survey over pay and benefits a cost of living issue or an issue about pay relativities across the organisation?
- Bullying and harassment were unacceptable and it was a serious concern that officers in the planning team were experiencing such incidents from the public and that some staff didn't know how to report such incidents. Additionally of those who did know how to report, only a small proportion did so. It would be good to hear what more could be done to support officers.

345. Members were advised:

- The number of FTE staff had remained relatively consistent. The website would be reviewed to ensure the figures were up to date.
- Incidents included both accidents and near misses.

- There was work to be done to ensure that potential candidates were aware of job opportunities. There was also a time lag between initiatives to improve diversity in recruitment being implemented and results of those interventions working through. There was work being done with the apprenticeship program and with local colleges to try and broaden diversity of recruitment. The Authority was increasing the use of social media in recruitment as well as using an external agency to assist in reaching different audiences.
- Work had been done to improve language in adverts and that was continually being monitored and reviewed but things could always be improved. Officers would consider the possibility of bringing in external people to improve the diversity of recruitment panels. An applicant tracking system was being introduced to make the application process easier, more accessible and to remove any bias in the application process. Staff were being trained on inclusivity to help raise awareness of unconscious bias.
- The staff survey was scheduled to be done every three years, but more focused surveys were also done, such as on wellbeing and health and safety.
- The staff survey was done following a cost saving exercise and was described by the consultant as the best they had ever seen in the public sector, but the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) were not complacent. There was an action plan to address the issues raised by the staff survey.
- Whilst the organisation offered hybrid working options, administrative roles were primarily based in Midhurst, whilst outdoor roles worked at sites across the Park, so those involved would need to be able to transport themselves to those locations. It was an inclusive job offer with good support.
- The Authority's incident figures were within the average for National Parks. Given the nature of the work and the number of hours worked the number of incidents were acceptable. Accident reports were examined quarterly by the Health & Safety Committee and the Authority actively encouraged near miss reporting. There had been no accidents reported that raised a concern but they were continually monitored.
- The staff survey had been completed quite close to a year where the Authority had been unable to provide a good cost of living increase and that was a possible factor in some of the results. The Authority was looking at opportunities for staff to progress within the band. Cost of living was a common concern raised in staff surveys generally at that time.
- Bullying was absolutely unacceptable and officers should not feel that dealing with it was part of their job. An All-Staff session was run on how to report bullying on the day that the survey results were released. The Authority was reviewing its bullying and harassment policy and looking at running training sessions for staff to reinforce that message.
- Staff survey questions were repeated from the 2018 survey for benchmarking purposes. The number of Member meetings and workshops had decreased following the 2022 governance review, and the survey had been completed post pandemic which would have also impacted Member contact time with officers due to the many remote meetings.

346. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted the update on the Authority's key work areas in HR during 2023-24; and
2. Agreed that it was satisfied that the Authority's Health and Safety activity over the last 12 months complied with its Health and Safety policy.

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

ITEM 14: REVIEW OF SDNPA PROCUREMENT STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

348. The Procurement Manager introduced report PR24/25-06 and reminded members of the report content.

349. The Committee commented that:

- Procurement was a great opportunity for the Authority to have a positive impact.
- The social value question had helped to generate a lot of change and it would be great to see if the same could be obtained with sustainability.
- Great to see a commitment to pay people quickly, especially important for small organisations and also good to ask for their experience of working with the Authority.

350. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted progress against the Procurement Strategy Action Plan during Year 3.
2. Approved the revised Procurement Strategy Action Plan Year 4 for Sept 2024-Sept 2025.

ITEM 15: QI SOUTH DOWNS COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS LIMITED PERFORMANCE REPORT 2024/25

351. The Head of Governance introduced report PR24/25-07 and reminded members of the report content.

352. The Committee commented that:

- Some of the KPIs had been challenging to measure as currently set out, but it was important to find an alternative way of measuring performance in those areas.
- As part of the new arrangements for monitoring the performance of Seven Sisters Country Park, it would be really helpful to have the two aspects of ‘contribution towards corporate plan’ and ‘operation as a business’ to enable the committee to clearly see the added value of the organisation.

353. Members were advised:

- Some of the data to support the KPIs had not been available. Different ways of measuring were being considered.

354. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the QI South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL) performance report 2024/25.

ITEM 16: RISK MANAGEMENT POLICY AND GUIDELINES

355. The Head of Governance introduced report PR24/25-08 and reminded members of the report content.

356. The Committee commented that:

- The report was clear, the layout was easy to scan and understand. The risk categories and the optimal and tolerable risks positions were really helpful, as were the revised financial categories for the various risks.
- Pleased to see the overarching renumbering of the risks.
- In the third paragraph of the Risk Appetite Summary it states ‘*the Authority remains open to innovative solutions and approaches which lead to significant benefits for the Authority and the public.*’ Should it say ‘*for the Authority, the park and the public*’ because sometimes the benefit may be for nature.

357. **RESOLVED:** The Committee agreed the Risk Management Policy and Guidance as set out at Appendix I subject to the inclusion of “the Park” in section 7.4, paragraph 3.

ITEM 17: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER

358. The Head of Governance introduced report PR24/25-09 and reminded members of the report content.
359. The Committee commented that:
- Was the scoring on Risk 1 Health and Safety reflective of the Authority's risk appetite as this was the area of lowest risk appetite? This looked like the area of greatest striving and lowest impact. If the likelihood of an accident had not been reduced why were the mitigations in place? Should the likelihood of risk be reduced from possible to unlikely?
360. Members were advised:
- Agreed that it appeared the mitigations in place were not effective, which was not an accurate reflection. Officers would consider increasing the inherent risk, rather than reducing the residual risk, as the chance of an accident was not unlikely even with mitigations in place.
361. **RESOLVED:** The Committee received and considered the Corporate Risk Register as at September 2024.
362. Mark Potter left the meeting.

ITEM 18: BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2024/25: MONTH 4

363. The Chief Finance Officer introduced report PR24/25-10 and reminded members of the report content. He noted an error on table 3.1 on p282 as the total on column 3 '2024/25 Forecast Month 4 should be (254) not (356).
364. The Committee commented that:
- Was the Section 106 Interest on Statutory Receipts in Appendix 3 the primary Section 106 (s106) receipts plus the interest or just the interest? Did the interest add to the s106 pot or did it become general income for the SDNPA?
 - At what point would the £428,000 in s106 interest be released for use?
 - Could Officers report back to the Committee on the mechanisms for using the s106 interest.
 - When would the Authority start feeling comfortable in reallocating the projected £254,000 underspend?
365. Members were advised:
- The Section 106 Interest on Statutory Receipts was cumulative and growing. Whilst there were clear rules on the use of s106 funds, restrictions on the use of interest generated from s106 funds were less specific.
 - The amount of s106 money being received was reducing as Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) money replaced it, and there was a lag between receipt of funds and spending. The interest on s106 money could be used more flexibly than the s106 funds themselves. All s106 funds are spent and they are usually held for up to 5-10 years.
 - There was no legal time limit on the use of s106 interest. It was up to the SDNPA how and when it wanted to use those funds.
 - There were a number of proposals being taken to SLT about accelerating projects that were currently in progress under Countryside and Policy Management and also looking at deploying scalable resources to support the delivery of the capital programme within the planned timescale because there was significant pressure on the team to deliver a number of complex projects.

366. **RESOLVED:** The Committee:

1. Noted the 2024/25 Revenue Forecast position as at month 4 of a net (£254,000) below budget variance.
2. Noted the 2024/25 Capital spend and commitments as at month 4 indicating £370,000 remaining to be committed by year-end.
3. Recommended that the National Park Authority (the “NPA”) approve the capital variations as set out in Appendix 2.
4. Noted the Reserves position as at month 4, as set out at Appendix 3.
5. Noted the Treasury Management overview and position as at month 4, as set out at Appendix 4.

ITEM 19: PART II MINUTES OF PREVIOUS POLICY AND RESOURCES MEETING

367. The Part II minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting held on 27 June 2024 were approved as a correct record.
368. The Chair closed the meeting at 15.50pm.

CHAIR

