

SOUTH DOWNS NEWS

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SOUTH DOWNS
NATIONAL PARK

WORK AND PLAY IN YOUR NATIONAL PARK

This month:

- **It's our birthday!** The South Downs National Park is now 15 years old and we're celebrating what has been achieved so far, as well as announcing a consultation about the future.
- **Exploring the Downs** Access to one of the National Park's most iconic hills has been improved.
- **Citizen science** Find out how you can play your part in nature recovery at Seven Sisters.
- **Bountiful bluebells!** Win a free day-out to one of the National Park's most delightful venues.

As always, please send your comments and ideas to us at newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk

Three cheers for 15 years! And now looking ahead...

We're marking the National Park's 15th birthday by announcing a major upcoming consultation that will help decide future priorities.

Following decades of campaigning and public inquiries, the South Downs National Park finally came into being on 31 March, 2010 after first being mooted in the 1920s.

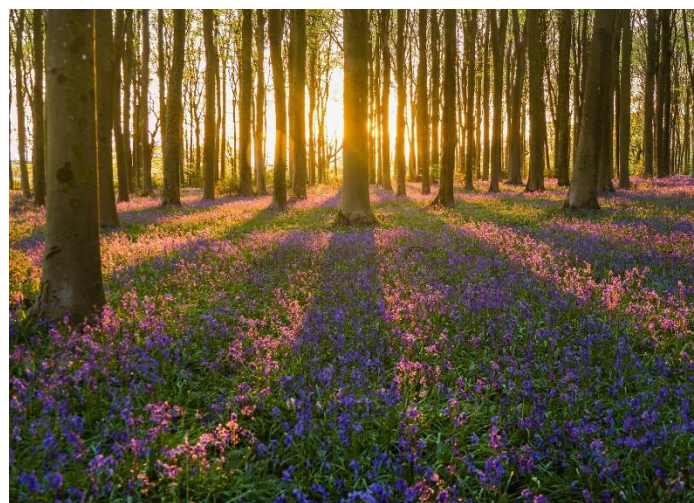
Fifteen years on, a great deal has been achieved for nature, climate and communities.

Yet there's still so much more to be done to protect and enhance the landscape, as well as create opportunities for people to enjoy it, all while facing growing challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water pollution and economic uncertainty.

A public consultation will run from June to August on a new draft Partnership Management Plan, which is an overarching plan setting out the goals for the National Park over the next five years. It will replace the current Partnership Management Plan.



The plan is produced by the Authority but is a shared plan for the National Park developed alongside dozens of other stakeholders, including farmers, landowners,



local authorities, parish councils, environmental bodies, businesses, community groups and residents.

The draft plan going out for consultation will include goals around nature, climate, people and place. Following feedback from the public and partners, the new plan will be adopted and begin from January 2026.

Siôn McGeever, Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park Authority, said: "The South Downs is one of the most special places in the UK and it's fantastic to mark this milestone of 15 years of being a National Park.

"Since its creation an incredible amount has been achieved by the many people and organisations who help to look after the South Downs. I want to thank each and every person who continues to do their bit to make this a wonderful place to visit, work and enjoy.

"The need for access to green space has never been more important at a time when the world is facing unprecedented climate, nature and economic crises. That means we need to be innovative, agile and forward-thinking, with an ambitious vision to take on these challenges and deliver for nature, climate, people and place.



"The beauty of this partnership plan is that everyone can play their part, no matter how big or small. This is everyone's opportunity to shape the future of their National Park and we'd like to hear from as many people as possible.

"I'm looking forward to being able to present our draft plan to the public and partners this summer and gathering the feedback as we work together to achieve our shared vision."

Further details on how to take part in the consultation will be released in May. For more information on the Partnership Management Plan, visit [here](#).

To mark the 15 years, here are 15 quickfire achievements of the National Park since its creation:

1. Wildlife bouncing back

Under the ReNature initiative, a total of 6,082 hectares – an area bigger than Worthing or Portsmouth – has now been created or improved to help nature thrive.

2. Trees, trees, trees!

Well over 70,000 new trees have been planted to create homes for wildlife.

3. Young people

Over 40,000 young people have been able to access learning opportunities in the great outdoors thanks to grants that support local schools, including school trips in the



National Park to learn more about nature, landscape and heritage.

4. Local communities

Almost £9m of funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) has been poured into hundreds of community projects across the National Park, including new access paths, pedestrian crossings, sports pavilions, community gardens and school facilities.

5. International Dark Sky Reserve

Next year the National Park will have had the coveted status for 10 years, making it one of the best and most accessible places to go stargazing in the UK.

6. Local Plan

The award-winning South Downs Local Plan, covering 2014 to 2033, replaced more than 1,000 overlapped policies that were in existence across the area of the National Park with 92 clear policies covering all aspects of

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

planning. The Local Plan supports delivery of clean water and air, dark night skies and tranquillity.

7. Protecting a habitat rarer than the rainforest

The Heathlands Reunited project has conserved and enhanced 23,825 hectares – or 18,000 football pitches – of lowland heath. An independent scientific assessment revealed the initiative was "significant" in restoring the ecological condition of the habitat.

8. Farming and food production

There are now five established Farm Cluster Groups in the National Park, covering approximately two thirds of the Park area, and working together towards sustainable farming practices and nature-friendly farming.

9. Seven Sisters Country Park

The iconic 280-hectare site has remained in public ownership, with the National Park Authority taking over full ownership and management in 2021. Since then over £2m has been invested in the site to improve the visitor experience and help wildlife.



10. Access for all

Miles Without Stiles routes have been created for people with limited mobility and families with pushchairs, together with a fleet of mobility scooters at key sites. The Egrets Way in East Sussex and Centurion Way in West Sussex have helped to connect busy urban areas to the heart of the National Park. Well over 50km of new or resurfaced cycle and multi-user paths have been installed.

11. Sharing and discovering cultural heritage

The Secrets of the Highwoods project discovered 2,298 sites of archaeological significance showing traces of people who had lived and worked on the South Downs. Seventy five per cent of this had never been recorded.

12. Affordable housing

More than 370 affordable homes have been built, as well as permission for hundreds more. The Authority has supported community-led schemes that prioritise affordable housing for local people.

13. Supporting local businesses

More than 430 businesses have now joined the Our South Downs scheme to help support the rural economy.

14. Wetlands

Ten dew ponds have been beautifully restored to help support birds, mammals, fish and insects, with many more set to be rejuvenated. An exciting £1.7m project called "Downs to the Sea" recently got under way to restore and create a network of "blue spaces".



15. Bees, bees, bees!

More than 160 football pitches of new wildflower areas have been added!

Vital repairs to pathway



Access to one of the most sacred – and spookiest – spots on the South Downs has been improved in time for the spring.

Thanks to £25,000 funding from the British Mountaineering Council, 800m of pathway up to Chanctonbury Ring has been given a much-needed makeover.

The popular path, which is part of the South Downs Way and known locally as Washington Bostal, was in a bad state of repair after years of wear and tear, with walkers having to dodge water-filled gullies.

Some 400 hours of manual labour by four high-skilled path workers – using three diggers, two dumper trucks and two rollers – has transformed the route. Now there is a smooth, durable chalk surface and a new camber to help rainwater run-off.

The upgrade was part of the British Mountaineering Council's "Mend Our Mountains" campaign, from the BMC's Access & Conservation Trust, which is helping to repair some of the most vital walking routes in England and Wales.

Ben Bessant, National Trails and Countryside Access Officer, joined members of Highdown Hillwalking and Mountaineering Club to test out the new path.

Ben said: "This was one of the most eroded sections of the South Downs Way and it had got to the point where we really had to do something.

"This new chalk and flint path looks fantastic and will last for many years to come. It's in keeping with this ancient site which has been walked by humans for several thousands of years."

Sue Waton, Secretary of Highdown Hillwalking and Mountaineering Club, said: "The transformation has been amazing - this path is so much better than the rutted, slippery surface we had before. It makes you confident you can walk it in all weathers and allows access to all levels of mobility to come out and enjoy this incredible scenery."



Upgrades at Seven Sisters



New "citizen science" photo posts, wildlife ponds and improved habitats for birds are among the latest improvements at Seven Sisters Country Park.

Four years on since the National Park Authority began managing the 280-hectare site and investment continues to improve the iconic beauty spot for both nature and people.

One of the latest upgrades is the installation of three special photo posts. The aim of the posts is to help the National Park Authority create a detailed picture of how its work is changing Seven Sisters across the seasons.

Visitors are being encouraged to become "citizen scientists" by taking a photo using the cradles and submit the image on social media, using the hashtags, or by email. Over time the collated images will be used to build evidence on what's working at the country park and areas that may need more investment.



Meanwhile, enhancements to wetlands have just been completed, including the restoration of two historic ponds and the creation of a brand-new one in the park's dry valley. This vital work will help support birds, mammals, amphibians and insects such as dragonflies.

Two important sluice gates have been repaired on the Cuckmere meanders to help control water levels and prevent areas drying out. Two new scrapes, or shallow ponds, have also been dug to create muddy feeding habitats for wading birds such as the little egret, dunlin and ringed plover. Other improvements include replacing gates along the South Downs Way.

Claire Onslow, Commercial Manager for Seven Sisters Country Park, said: "This is such a special place and it's wonderful to see all the changes, big and small, that are making the site even better for wildlife and visitors. Everyone can play their part in nature recovery and these new photo posts are a fantastic way of helping in the stewardship of this iconic landscape."



Nature and neurodiversity



Did you know that neurodiversity celebration week recently took place in March?

A growing part of our engagement and outreach work has been connecting with children, as well as adults, with neurodiversity.

'Neurodiversity' refers to the natural diversity in human brains. Neurodivergence is the term for when someone's brain processes, learns, or behaves differently from what is considered 'typical' and conditions include dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC).

It's estimated that around one in seven people in the UK are neurodivergent.

A widening body of research shows nature can be a powerful force that can have a positive impact on the lives of neurodivergent people.

We recently worked with Chichester Boys Club and the outreach team at Chichester Festival Theatre to organise a day of nature connection and storytelling at a beautiful heathland. The boys have autism and were aged between 18 and 30 years old.

It was a wonderful, uplifting day, to say the least.

Angela Watkins, Youth and Outreach Project Manager at Chichester Festival Theatre, says: "Being in the open air, on our local heathland, brought a calm and connectedness to the group which was truly joyful. The young adults who participated in this outdoor experience delighted in the creativity and freedom these open spaces offer. I would thoroughly recommend immersing yourself in our incredible local resources as often as possible."

Kate Drake, Health and Wellbeing Officer for the National Park, says: "Just as nature flourishes through biodiversity, human communities flourish through neurodiversity.



"When we honour the full spectrum of human experience, we foster a society that values empathy, inclusion, and understanding—where everyone is free to be exactly who they are."

To watch a film about a recent visit to the National Park click [here](#).

Winners of youth competition



A charming picture of two bickering black-headed gulls and an otherworldly image depicting solitude on the South Downs have won this year's Youth Photo Competition.

Dozens of talented young photographers submitted beautiful snaps from their time in the National Park, covering everything from wildlife, to sweeping landscapes and local heritage.

A worthy winner was Jakob Komaier-Peeters, 16, who captured a very fun picture at Arundel Wetland Centre.

Jakob, who has won a trip to Bird World, said: "I noticed the gulls on the fence and photographed them for quite a while.

"I found them to be very lively and fun to photograph, and I liked this photo in particular because it shows of their personalities really well.

"I've been visiting the South Downs my whole life, and I have many memories of it, particularly from hikes with my family and scouting.

"I've always loved the freedom and tranquillity there, as well as the unique wildlife that can be found."

Meanwhile, Ellis Skelton also impressed judges with a dreamy image, "Windswept Solitude", showing a lone tree at Bo Peep as a storm brews in the sky.

Ellis, now 18, has won a day-out at Marwell Wildlife.

Well done to all who took part and keep being inspired by the South Downs National Park! Details of this year's competition will be revealed in May.



Enjoying the coastline safely



The National Park is known for its stunning white cliffs – a remnant of a huge chalk dome that rose up from the sea through powerful tectonic forces when the African plate crashed into Europe some 50m years ago.

Did you also know that the chalk is the remains of billions of microscopic marine organisms called coccoliths?

When these creatures died, their skeletons sank down to the bottom of the ocean floor, forming a soft ooze. Over millions of years, this mush compacted and hardened – transforming living bones into white, crumbly rock!

All this leads to one conclusion – **the chalk in the South Downs is very unstable!**

As the weather improves and more visitors head to the coast, we're urging people to stay well away from the edge of the cliffs.

The iconic white cliffs, which were most recently featured in the film *Wicked*, can actually give way at any time. Each year thousands of tonnes of chalk falls into sea along the coast from Eastbourne to Seaford Head.

Despite the dangers, visitors regularly stand too close to the edge of the cliffs, or walk or sit at the cliff base when on the beach.

The awareness campaign is being led by the Cliff Safety Partnership, which includes local councils, attractions, the coastguard and the National Park Authority.

Councillor Claire Dowling, cabinet member at East Sussex County Council, said: "The cliffs contain many overhangs and cracks that visitors may not be able to see, as illustrated recently by a large crack in the chalk cliff near Belle Tout lighthouse. We want people to enjoy visiting the stunning East Sussex coast but to do so safely and urge them to stay back from the cliff edges and bases."

Beach walkers are also reminded to check the tide times before heading out to make sure they are not cut off by the incoming tide, or forced to walk too close to the base of the cliffs to avoid the rising sea water.

Visitors can check the tide times before setting out at www.tidetimes.org.uk

In case of an emergency, call 999.

Big boost for our birdlife



Much-needed improvements to encourage more birdlife at RSPB Pulborough Brooks have been given the green light by the National Park Authority.

Members of the Planning Committee voted unanimously to approve plans to install four new hydrological structures to help control water levels and ensure areas don't dry out.

The 159-hectare site mainly consists of grazing marsh and a series of ditches, serving as part of the River Arun's floodplain and home to species such as lapwing, nightingale, short-eared owl and the incredibly rare Little Whirlpool Ramshorn Snail.

However, the lack of hydrological controls has started to become a real issue in recent years, compounded by a more unpredictable climate.

Reduced water levels across the site and compaction of ground at key locations have made some areas unsuitable habitat for wading birds. The lack of water flow has also caused the silting up of ditches and reduced water quality, affecting plants and insects, as well as the birds.

The new dams and sluices will maintain a steady water level and also ensure more "muddy edges", which are essential for feeding purposes for wetland birds.

The planning approval is the first milestone in the £2.4m **Downs to the Sea** project, which started last month with a plan to restore and create a network of "blue spaces" across the region. The project is supported by a £1.7m grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Downs to the Sea will help carry out much-needed restoration work to a



number of internationally-designated wildlife sites, including RSPB Pulborough Brooks and RSPB Pagham Harbour in West Sussex. The initiative will restore 15 ponds in the National Park to create biodiversity hotspots and support the movement of wildlife between sites.

Natacha Bricks-Yonow, Project Manager for Downs to the Sea, said: "This is a wonderful first step towards improving wetlands across the region and encouraging more wildlife."

Community climate action

Ancient downland church holds secrets of the past



The community is rallying round to save an iconic downland church dating back at least 1,200 years.

St Mary's Church, set in an idyllic location at the end of a farm track in Bepton, stands as one of the remaining examples of Grade 1 listed church buildings in Sussex.

But its future hangs in the balance. Where the air was once filled with the sound of church bells, now stands decaying and damaged timber. Due to rot in the bell tower's timber structure and a previous infestation of death watch beetle, the bells are no longer able to be used, having stood silent for more than 20 years. Meanwhile, damage to the roof has worsened.

Last year a small group of residents started the Friends of St Mary's charity in a bid to raise the money needed to prevent further decay and restore the church to its former glory.

The group is encouraging people to visit the ancient site to find out more and a contactless payment device is situated in the church to help fundraise. A flower festival was due to take place this month, but it has now been postponed.



Darron Carver, a local historian working for the Weald and Downland Museum, believes that not only does the bell tower have Saxon origins, but that a tombstone in the knave could be that of a Templar knight.

Darron said: "As a historic building professional, I find the church exciting, with huge potential for future learning and discovery. I have recently established the ledger stone outside the vestry door is of Knights Templar origin. The associated sculpture used as an Easter Sepulcher has a French dedication to Rado de la Hedol and is of the early decorated period. This is of particularly fine craftsmanship and unusual for what would have been a small parish church on the edge of the Weald."

Learn more at www.beptonchurchfriends.org



Climate action is springing up in towns and villages across the South Downs in the form of new community energy schemes.

Helping to deliver carbon reduction, these initiatives also aim to deliver energy security and more predictable costs for home and business owners.

With support from East Hampshire District Council, Winchester City Council and South Downs National Park Authority, a non-profit co-operative called Energise South Downs (ESD) has been delivering a series of workshops with local communities.

We catch up with Katherine Hewetson, ESD Community Lead, and Catriona Cockburn, Chief Executive of ESD, to find out more.

Can you tell us a bit more about these workshops?

Future Energy Landscapes is a workshop that enables communities to have informed conversations about their understanding and feelings towards renewable energy technologies and then imagine how and where those different technologies might be acceptable (or not) in their local landscape. Participants learn about how much energy their community uses to power and heat their homes, how much carbon that then creates and what happens if they look at generating their electricity and heat from local, renewable energy technologies.

How have you been working with the National Park?

The National Park has generously funded a road show of the Future Energy Landscapes workshop, so we have been able to host communities in and around the park to start an important conversation about renewable energy. Over the last year we have taken the workshop to towns like Petersfield and Liss, as well as rural communities such as Harting and Upham Parish and have lots more planned.

What have you learned through these workshops?

People are often stunned by how little solar or wind power they would need to power their communities.

Local people know about their local landscape and community and need to be central to the conversation about our transition away from fossil fuels. What the

WIN day-out at Hinton Ampner!



With its bountiful bluebells, one of the most glorious places to visit in the South Downs during the spring is Hinton Ampner.

This quintessentially English country house, tucked away in a quiet corner of the Hampshire countryside, is set in a delightful 12-acre garden. The Regency-style house has 20th-century interiors featuring former owner Sir Raph Dutton's exquisite collection of ceramics and art. Outside, manicured lawns lead down to avenues of sculptured topiary and borders full of scent and colour.

One of the highlights of any visit is exploring the pretty Tudor walled kitchen garden, where much of the produce makes its way into delicious treats for Hinton's visitors. It's packed with flowers too, and espaliered fruit trees bearing tight clusters of pink and white buds.

If you stroll down to the long terrace behind the house you'll discover a magnificent vista across parkland peppered with stunning veteran trees and, of course, the rolling South Downs.

Beyond the gardens is 1,600 acres of wider estate including glorious beech woodland filled with bluebells in late April. There are several downloadable walks to choose from.

There's something new to enjoy every season. In early summer Hinton's extensive rose collection bursts into bloom and the house is filled with floral displays. In late summer, exotic-looking dahlias pop up across the gardens, and in the autumn there's even a pumpkin festival!

This Easter, until 21 April, the venue is running outdoor adventures, including a chance to collect your bunny ears and tackle fun challenges left by Bonnie the Bunny!

The National Park has teamed up with the National Trust to offer a one-day family pass. People signing up to the newsletter during April will be automatically entered into the draw to win the ticket. Those who are already signed up can email "bountiful bluebells" to newsletter@southdowns.gov.uk before midnight on 30 April.

Sign up to the newsletter [here](#) and see competition T&Cs [here](#).

workshops have also highlighted is the critical need for policy change, making it mandatory for new homes to have renewables and for better information and finance being made available to homeowners so that we can see low carbon domestic technologies being taken up at scale.

What is community energy?

It is about local energy for local people. Community energy schemes deliver carbon savings through locally generated renewable energy projects, funded by local investment. They give communities a say in how and where their power is generated, placing people and communities, at the centre of the low-carbon transition.

Why is community energy growing?

The transition away from fossil fuels to power our homes and industry is a huge undertaking. Community energy can enable local small-scale generation projects to get off the ground relatively quickly compared to large commercial schemes. Because they come from local people and groups who deeply understand the local context, they are welcomed by that community.

What have been your achievements so far at Energise South Downs?

Our first 18 months has been about reaching out to communities to raise awareness about the huge potential that community energy has. We have worked closely with local authorities to support and influence policy with regards to the renewable energy transition and have supported local organisations to develop their own projects through carrying out feasibility studies and supporting them with funds through successful applications for grants. ESD won the CPRE Hampshire Climate Action Countryside Award and we were also shortlisted finalist for Community Energy group of the year award at the Community Energy England awards.



What's the ultimate goal?

Our ultimate goal has been to get our first community-owned renewable energy projects over the line. In Spring 2025, Energise South Downs will launch its first share offer to raise capital for solar panels at three rooftop sites in Hampshire, with accessible minimum investments to ensure everyone can get involved. The system size is 280 kWp with an annual energy production 260000 MWh and will save a total of 56 tonnes of carbon in the first year. To have your say on the future of community energy in the South Downs and sign up for the Energise South Downs newsletter to be the first to hear about investment opportunities, [click here](#).

How can I get involved and find out more? Can I attend one of the workshops?

Sign up to our Newsletter and find out about our how you can attend one of our workshops [here](#)

Things to do in the South Downs this April

Please follow the links as booking may be necessary. Find these and more events across the National Park and submit your own events at

southdowns.gov.uk/events/



Tulips at Hinton Ampner by Hugh Mothersole



- Calling all art-lovers! **The Arc in Winchester** is hosting an exhibition entitled “Every Step Of The Way” until July. Focusing on the South Downs Way and in partnership with The Ramblers Association, 33 contemporary artists articulate the experience of walking the 100-mile National Trail through the lens of their creative practices. The display brings together exceptional paintings and printmaking, sculpture, land art, textiles and more, from artists including Fiona McIntyre, Jon Edgar, Howard Phipps and Simon Hitchens.
- **Amberley Museum** is thrilled to announce the much-anticipated Spring Bus Show returns on Sunday, 27 April. The event will bring together a remarkable collection of vintage buses, including those from the Southdown Omnibus Trust and Amberley Museum, as well as visiting vehicles from other companies. Among the highlights will be a nostalgic ride on an open-topped bus from before World War II!
- If you're looking for spectacular views of the coastline, a 36-metre high observation wheel has been installed on Eastbourne's Eastern Seafront and is operating throughout April.
- Are you aged between 16 and 25 and want to make a difference for nature and the environment? We have an exciting opportunity on 26 April to be part of the “City Nature Challenge” in its 10th year! This citizen science project is a great way to contribute to a nationally-significant project. During the day there will be a guided walk using the iNaturalist app to make observations about nature. The walk will also include some mindful moments to connect with the beautiful surroundings. Organisers will meet you at the entrance to the Goring-by-Sea train station at 10am and the group will return by 3pm. **[Book a place here.](#)**

Pic credits

P1 Julia Vasylevska; P5 left Daniel Greenwood; P5 Right RSPB; P5 Right (lapwing) Graham Osbourne; P7 Right National Trust/Simon Newman