

South Downs Network / South Downs national Park Authority combined meeting, 29th March 2023

Meeting Notes

Present:

SDNPA - Andrew Lee, Trevor Beatie

SDN - Phil Belden, Dan Osbourne, Christopher Napier, Grahame Joseph, Tony Whitbread, Chris Todd, David Burnet, David Coldwell.

South Downs Network update – by Tony Whitbread

Thanks to Vic lent's sterling work, the SDN has improved, with an active website and much work behind the scenes, resulting in more professionalism and a professional consultancy undertaking the admin role. Funding is tight and the SDN is seeking increased subs from members and looking in to grants / donations / sponsorship. The googlegroup is being re-established to keep everyone in touch.

National Background – Led by Trevor Beatie

National Parks in general, and SDNPA in particular, feel they are being let down by DEFRA and the current wider political situation. There is a growing mismatch between the resources (core grant) to NPAs, which is reducing, versus the rhetoric / expectation, which is increasing. The SDNPA is endeavouring to maintain its long term ambition, but against a background of reducing funding will have to be more focused. The funding settlement for the Park has been flat for the past 3 years and will continue to be flat for the next 2. 5 years of flat income against a background of significant inflation represents a major cut in resourcing, 40% over the 5 years.

There is concern about recognition of the special nature of NPs by government. It seems that NPs are seen as delivery mechanisms for Defra's specific priorities rather than needing to further the much broader National Park Purposes, which should be the starting point for policy and implementation. Furthermore, there is a lack of political support and delivery by government of promises and actions presented in the past. We are 5 years on from the Glover Review, and its subsequent consultations / responses, but very little has been actioned. CNP has pushed for increased action, supported by several in the House of Lords (including key Sussex Lords) but it is unclear that this will result in positive change in government attitude.

It was suggested that SDN and SDNPA work together to prepare a "manifesto" for the SDNP such that we articulate our expectations in relation to NPs well before the general election (see below).

SDNPA budget and management – led by Andrew Lee

The SDNPA budget has been reset to absorb the reduction of resources resulting from a flat financial settlement against background inflation. This has required a reduction of about £1m of costs (out of a budget of around £10-11m, so a 10% cut). SDNPA is still viable, but the reductions have been painful. Some 14 posts have been lost, mainly through voluntary redundancy, and there have been changes in staff structure. For instance, the NP is now covered by 3 not 4 Area Ranger Teams. In the past, turnover was minimal, this has now increased, resulting in vacancies, so recruiting is also taking place to fill gaps beyond the restructure. There is a particular problem with planning staff, in common with other local authorities, where the private sector can offer higher salaries, resulting in a loss of public sector planning staff to the private sector. This new structure will need time to settle down.

Against this background the SDNPA is focusing even more on the ~~high-level~~ high-level targets in its ~~Corporate~~ Corporate Plan (Nature Recovery, Climate Action, NP for All) and this is being quite successful. For example, there are now 330 nature recovery projects around the Park and the

“Farming in Protected Landscapes” initiative is proving a major success. This funding is managed by the SDNPA with a farmer-led panel, aiming to put funding into places where it can deliver the most NP benefit, but in a way that does not create administrative burden to farmers (such as adding value in supply chains). Over £1m distributed to date. This could be seen as a test bed for how the new ELMS could work.

Much work is being done by the SDNPA in green finance. Nutrient trading, biodiversity net gain, carbon trading and other payments for ecosystem services, some of which can be stacked, are being coordinated by the SDNPA, acting as an independent broker to bring initiatives together. This green finance approach is being done in partnership with “Palladium”, a finance company which has a national ~~partnership~~ partnership via NPP. The SDNPA is making sure that an appropriate mitigation hierarchy is followed, to ensure that ~~offset~~ offsets are legitimately required. There is a danger that green financing of land management can be piecemeal, with individual projects being non-strategic and scattered. SDNPA aim to bring legitimate green finances together, to connect these income ~~streams~~ streams at a landscape scale in locations where environmental gain can best be delivered, long-term. Climate mitigation is being added to this initiative (eg Ouse Valley).

Other areas where progress is being made, albeit some on a small scale, include health & wellbeing, education and attracting new audiences (see SDNPA website and YouTube videos for examples), access (eg almost complete Lewes – Newhaven Egret’s Way, Centurion Way extension – Singleton and SDW, A31 in Hampshire).

General discussion

Road-building was raised, the Highways Agency (HA) delaying some schemes, however, the concern being that this threat may not go away. HA may turn their attention to other potentially damaging ~~activities~~ activities, and it is likely that delayed schemes may reappear (with increased cost) in the future.

Solar farms may be beneficial in overall environmental terms, but can have landscape implications. Good designs can give biodiversity ~~gain~~ gain, but bad ones can be damaging. CPRE are concerned about the negative landscape consequences so prefer a brownfield, “roofs first” approach. SDNPA understand this and, whilst aware of the need for renewables, will seek good design.

SDNPA has looked at the carbon footprint of the National Park area (not just SDNPA activity) using “Small World Consulting” (run by Mike Berners-Lee). They are keen to ensure that any carbon sequestration and offsetting is legitimate in carbon footprint measures. This has been rolled out across all UK NPs, so there is a consistent approach and measuring.

Next steps

It was agreed that we should take forward the concept of a “manifesto” for the National Park. In this we should aim to articulate some clear asks that can be used in lobbying, most immediately, heading to the general election. These could be crystallised from the (Glover) Landscapes Review, and from additional proposals from the experience of both the SDNPA and the SDN. For example, taking the government non-actioned recommendations, to strengthen the requirements of the Environment Act (the duty of public bodies to have regard to NP purposes), improved powers of competence and updating NP purposes. The SDN could take the S62 duty and ask the relevant public bodies how they are delivering on this, perhaps as an annual report. The development of the manifesto could also be a mechanism for engaging the wider SDN membership, with members using it for local lobbying.

It was agreed that an on-line meeting would be organised to initiate the first draft bullet points for a manifesto. Andrew Lee, Phil Belden and Tony Whitbread agreed to take this forward.