

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK

Note for East Hampshire Association of Parish & Town Councils Meeting 9th March 2016

This is the latest of my regular notes for EHAPTC Meetings about some of the activities of the National Park Authority (NPA) which may be of interest to Parish Councils.

As Parish Clerks now receive regular Highlights of SDNPA work, my notes are shorter than in the past and, on this occasion, I focus upon:

- The Local Plan, Community Infrastructure Levy and Landscape Character
- 'Take the Lead' to protect sheep and ground-nesting birds
- Highways England Trunk Road Proposals
- School Teachers' Conference
- Local Food & Drink and support for dairy farm businesses
- Barn owls, Heathlands and Dark Skies
- Discovery Cycle Rides
- Sustainable Communities Fund
- Other 'on the ground' work
- Local contacts.

Responses to the consultation on the Local Plan (Preferred Options), Sept-Oct 2015

There were over 2,600 individual comments on the most recent Local Plan consultation from about 400 stakeholders. Analysis shows that about 75% of responses were supportive with 23% objecting to policies or sections of text. Work will now continue to revisit each and every part of the plan, considering all comments received along with new evidence.

The next version of the plan will be the 'Publication' version which will be subject to another, more limited, round of consultation. All representations made at that stage will be given to the Planning Inspectorate (along with the Publication version itself) for an independent examination. It is hoped that the Local Plan will be adopted next year.

Community Infrastructure Levy

Following consultations on a Preliminary Draft CIL Charging Schedule in February 2014 and on a Draft Charging Schedule in June 2015, the National Park Authority approved its CIL Charging Schedule and Infrastructure Delivery Plan for submission to the Planning Inspectorate in February 2016. This incorporated a number of modifications in the light of consultation responses and updated evidence. The next stage will be an Examination in public and it is anticipated that the CIL regime may be implemented in around June / July.

Landscape Character

The NPA is considering the future development of the 'Landscape watch' project with Hampshire County Council and Natural England. The project has been developed to use volunteers and crowd sourced data to help monitor the way landscape character is changing over time.

'Take the Lead' to protect sheep and ground-nesting birds

Dog-walking is more popular than ever, but dogs with irresponsible owners can disrupt other dog walkers and people without dogs. Attacks on sheep and wildlife can cause significant problems. Encourage your community to watch the NPA's short animated film and help to change behaviours: <https://vimeo.com/94658351>

Income Generation

Like all National Parks in England, the South Downs is wholly reliant on a grant from Central Government and income from planning fees to deliver all its main functions. The Park Authority has, however, been successful in winning external grant funding (eg. from the Lottery etc) for a number of major projects in each of last few years. Government has made it very clear that it is looking for all National Parks to develop new approaches to generate income and sources of funding so that the grant from Central Government can be reduced and / or removed. SDNPA has, therefore, initiated some work in this area, to begin to identify potential options and ideas across both philanthropic and commercial sources. The NPA is clear that any approved approaches would have to meet some clear criteria, including alignment with the National Park's purposes and duty, and reputational issues. This will be an important area of work in the months and years ahead if the NPA is to continue to deliver high quality outcomes.

Highways England Trunk Road Proposals

Another piece of work which the SDNPA has been forced to undertake in recent months relates to potential proposals from Highways England for improvements to Trunk Roads. In particular, there are a series of potential projects along the length of the A27, some of which could have effects inside the National Park (or be very visible beyond the boundary). A number of alternative options are being considered around Chichester (including two northern routes which could sever the city from the countryside and National Park). The NPA will be trying to work closely with Highways England (and their consultants) to influence the selection of a preferred route and to minimise any adverse impacts and maximise mitigation.

The Hampshire Devolution Programme

The National Park Authority is also trying to work with all the local authorities in Hampshire (and with the New Forest National Park) to consider the merits and implications of any Devolution Bid being negotiated with Central Government.

Dirty Teaching: South Downs Teachers' Conference

Using sheep to teach maths and science, managing challenging behaviour outside the classroom, and teaching tourism in the most visited national park in the UK will be just some of the highlights at the 'Our South Downs' Teachers Conference on 13 April 2016.

More than 1,600 teachers are already using the South Downs National Park as a resource to teach more than 74,000 pupils across the entire curriculum.

The Conference, now in its fourth year, is packed with inspiration for teachers wanting to find out about opportunities for local outdoor learning in the National Park. This year's key note speakers include Juliet Robertson, author of 'Dirty Teaching: A beginner's guide to learning outdoors'. This year the conference will be held at Ditcham Park School near Petersfield. Places cost £50. Click here to: [Find out more and book your place](#)

Local Food and Drink Portal

With 85 per cent of the South Downs being farmland of one kind or another, any view from the top of the Downs is filled with fields: flocks of sheep, cattle grazing, orchards, vineyards and fields of wheat. And, with watercress and other local produce from our streams and rivers, the area is full of things to eat and drink.

The National Park's "South Downs Food & Drink Portal" is now fully operational with over 10,000 subscribers. The initiative is helping over 250 local businesses with over 300 more also expressing an interest in taking part. Full details can now be found via this link: <http://www.southdownsfood.org/>

Food Enterprise Zone

The National Park has been selected by Government to be a pilot to support a number of dairy farm businesses through site specific Local Development Orders. In addition, advice and assistance is being provided to other dairy farms which responded to letters from the NPA.

Barn Owls boosted by BOB

For the past two years South Downs National Park rangers have been working with local farmers and ecologists on 'Project BOB' – installing new barn owl boxes and monitoring existing boxes for barn owls. There are now many happy families of farmers, pleased to know that barn owls are thriving on their land. Not everyone has the right conditions for barn owls but there may be other birds that you could make a home for in your local area. Find out more about the National Park's Barn Owl project (and about National Nest Box week) here: [Find out more about Project BOB](#) and [Find out more about National Nest Box Week](#).

New initiative to enhance Heathlands

A partnership assembled by the National Park Authority has been awarded a significant grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to protect and enhance areas of internationally rare lowland heath habitat. These beautiful heaths are among the rarest of all the habitats in the South Downs as over 80% of them have been lost since the early 1800s. These heathlands are scientifically important, being the only places in England where all twelve of our native reptiles and amphibians can be found. The total value of the project is £2.37 million with the NPA receiving a grant of £1.44 million from HLF and project partners providing the remainder. The aim is to create bigger, better, joined-up heathlands that people know about, care about, and use responsibly and sustainably. Working with ten partners, the NPA will reach thousands of people and will train 300 volunteers to help restore and recreate 580 hectares of heathland. The project area extends from the Woolmer Forest near Liss to the Wiggonholt Common in the east, and from Black Down near Haslemere down to Midhurst Common.

International Dark Skies Reserve bid submitted

Our Local Ranger, Dark-skies-Dan, and his group of dedicated volunteers have spent the past three years mapping out the quality of night skies across the National Park. He's also attended countless parish, town and county council meetings to develop policies that will help protect our skies. All of this has been in preparation for a bid to get parts of the South Downs named as an International Dark Skies Reserve. The bid has now been submitted to the International Dark-Sky Association and the outcome should be known within the next few months. Communities are being encouraged to play their part and Dan Oakley is happy to provide advice and ideas.

Discovery Cycle Rides

As part of its Sustainable Transport project, the NPA is arranging a series of free-to-join rides led by community cycling groups during the spring, to demonstrate how easy it is to explore the South Downs by bike. From photography tips to stargazing and pond-dipping to discovering river wildlife, each ride covers a different theme. Routes are designed to build people's confidence to be able to explore the South Downs by bike with the whole family. All rides are free but places must be booked in advance. Remaining rides in Hampshire include: Photography 'Click and Ride' on Sunday 13 March; Dark Skies Night Ride on Monday 14 March and Discover Wildlife of the River Meon on Wednesday 23 March. For more information click here [Discovery Rides page](#) or [Book your place on a Winchester cycle event](#)

The Centurion Way was officially opened on 22 December. This multi-user route follows the line of the old Chichester to Midhurst railway line.

Sustainable Communities Fund

As well as continuing to be a member of the NPA's Planning Committee, I am now the Chairman of the NPA's Sustainable Communities Panel, working alongside some experienced panel members from a range of partner organisations.

Any partnership or other not for profit organisations which include social enterprise, community interest companies, voluntary organisations and 'for profit' organisations (these projects cannot be for financial gain to the business) can apply for funding if they believe their project is bringing social, environmental, economic or cultural benefits to a community within the National Park.

Grants are available for up to 50% of the project cost from £250 to a maximum of £10,000.

More information is available via: <http://southdowns.gov.uk/care-for/supporting-communities-business/sustainable-communities-fund/>

Other 'on the ground' work

Special projects now connect people who experience depression, anxiety, stress and other mental health issues with the countryside and staff from the Treloar School near Alton have developed a programme of activities for young people from the school with disabilities.

On the ground, volunteers and staff (sometimes in joint exercises with local community conservation groups) continue to manage and improve chalk grassland sites and carry out scrub clearance, woodland coppicing, hedge laying and the installation of sign posts.

Rangers and volunteers in Hampshire found 328 harvest mouse nests in a recent survey – compared with only one in a survey of 1999 and last year's tally of 143. Staff have also worked with five farms in the Selborne Landscape Partnership Area to carry out harvest mouse habitat sampling.

New publications include a Delicious Days Out leaflet and a one about the Folklore of the South Downs. Both are available from arrange of outlets across the National park as well as from the South Downs Centre in Midhurst.

Local contacts

- Natalie Fellows, the Planning Link Officer for Hampshire parishes, can be contacted via: 07872 410442 and natalie.fellows@southdowns.gov.uk
- The Authority's Western Downs team, based at the Queen Elizabeth Country Park, acts as a 'first stop shop' for communities and land managers, providing advice and support towards achieving the national park's purposes. The team also acts as the 'eyes and ears' on the ground, assisting with a wide range of activities. Contact the team to find out how the NPA may be able to help your community and please encourage anyone interested in volunteering to contact Nick Heasman, our Area Manager, on nick.heasman@southdowns.gov.uk or 02392 571381

Although my role is to act in the best interests of the whole of the National Park, I always aim to maintain close contact with Parish Councils in East Hampshire to make sure that all important issues, concerns and ideas are taken into account by the National Park Authority.

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3rd March 2016