

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK**

### **Note for East Hampshire Association of Parish & Town Councils Meeting 14<sup>th</sup> September 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 can be shorter than they were initially. The NPA's Highlights note is not an exhaustive list of achievements, but selects some of the projects that the Authority and its partners are working on. To complement those notes I will focus primarily on the following topics:

- Update about the South Downs Local Plan
- Autumn workshops for Parish Councils
- Implications of Brexit
- Annual South Downs Research Conference
- Findings from the 'Secrets of the High Woods' project
- A new 'Heathlands Reunited' Project
- Other practical help 'on the ground'
- Leaflets and information (including a new horse-riding leaflet)
- Sustainable Communities Fund Grants
- Local contacts.

#### **Update about the South Downs Local Plan**

Although the next formal stage of the Local Plan will be the Pre-Submission consultation (in September 2017) there will be an informal round of consultation with Parish Councils in November 2016 (see the following item in this report) and emerging policies will be considered at each meeting of the Authority's Planning Committee during the intervening months.

The formal Pre-Submission Consultation can only focus on matters of soundness (ie. whether the plan is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy) rather than being a general consultation on the detail of the plan and so it will be important to get all the policy wording right in the meantime.

The entire plan will then be considered by the Planning Committee and by the Full National Park Authority later next year and the aim is that, after the consultation and consideration at an independent examination, the Plan will be adopted by the NPA in 2018.

New officers are now in place to help take this work forward with Matt Bates as the new Local Plan Lead and Kate Stuart as the new Senior Planner; both reporting to Lucy Howard and to the Director of Planning, Tim Slaney. The recent pause in the Local Plan timetable has allowed a number of Neighbourhood Development Plans to catch up with the Local Plan including, for example, work in East Meon and Liss.

#### **Autumn workshop for Parish Councils**

The joint EHAPTC/WDALC/SDNPA autumn workshop for parish councils will be held on 14<sup>th</sup> November in Petersfield, commencing at 6.30pm (with equivalent events on 21<sup>st</sup> November in Lewes and 23<sup>rd</sup> November in Midhurst).

The main purpose of these workshops is to present any new Local Plan allocations for comment and information will cover any new housing sites, gypsy and traveller sites, employment sites and local green spaces.

Parish Councils are being invited to see these proposals (and provide feedback) before the allocations are finalised in the pre-submission version of the South Downs Local Plan.

## **Implications of Brexit**

The decision to leave the EU may have a wide range of possible implications for Britain's National Parks and for SDNPA, its partners and stakeholders, landowners, businesses and communities. Implications could be far reaching, with potential positive and negative effects, but all are extremely difficult to predict at this time.

## **Annual South Downs Research Conference**

The National Park Authority has recently hosted the third annual South Downs Research Conference, bringing together researchers, students, practitioners and academics to showcase research across a wide range of disciplines which help to support the special qualities of the National Park. This year's topics ranged from the disruptive effects that invasive species such as Himalayan Balsam are having on the pollination of native plants to the use of drones to monitor landscape change.

The keynote speaker was Professor Dave Goulson who explained that three species of bumblebee have already become extinct in the UK and that many more are under threat due to farm intensification and pesticides. Chalk grassland in the National Park can play an important role in their survival and the Professor set out an action plan in which everyone can play a role by engaging children at an early age, promoting wildlife friendly gardening, encouraging more citizen science and extending flower-rich grassland.

## **Findings from the 'Secrets of the High Woods' project**

As Parish Councils may have heard in the national news recently, some exciting discoveries have been made in the National Park as part of a cutting-edge archaeology project. The discoveries were made after airborne laser scanning (LiDAR) was used to map places that have been hidden under woodland for hundreds of years.

The work is part of [Secrets of the High Woods](#), a three-year project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). One of the biggest findings was the discovery of a vast area farmed by pre-historic people on an astonishing scale: extensive, well-preserved field-systems which have probably been untouched since the Romans left 1,600 years ago and which may go back much further. As one of the leaders of the project said: "Archaeologists are going to have to rethink the human story in this part of the country."

Findings from the research are now being shared through a touring interactive exhibition which will be at Petersfield Museum until 11th September and then at Queen Elizabeth Country Park from 8th to 30th November and at the West Sussex Records Office in Chichester from 13th February until 3rd March 2017.

## **New heathlands project thanks to lottery funding**

Work to restore and reunite areas of rare heathland in the National Park will start this autumn thanks to a £1.4 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Heaths are home to rare plants and animals as well as being important spaces for people. But they now only cover only 1% of the National Park, having gradually shrunk into 'islands' where isolated plants and animals are far more vulnerable to local extinction.

Heathlands support many rare and endangered species but are themselves among the world's most threatened habitats. [The Heathlands Reunited project](#), led by the NPA with ten partner organisations, aims to improve conditions at over forty sites over the next five years. This important project will also aim to greatly increase people's understanding of just how vital these habitats are.

Rare species that will benefit include the sand lizard (Britain's rarest reptile), the natterjack toad (Britain's rarest amphibian), field crickets and the silver-studded blue butterfly. There will be opportunities for local people and volunteers to assist with this project.

### **Other practical help 'on the ground'**

In recent months the National Park Authority has also pursued a wide range of activities:

- the pioneering work to release water voles has continued with 362 being released into the River Meon around Droxford in June and another 205 in August with help from landowners, staff, partners and volunteers. Recent surveys suggest they are making burrows and settling in well. Seventy pupils from Meonstoke School helped with the feeding and checking of the voles in the pens
- in a related piece of work, rangers and volunteers completed some habitat restoration (including stinging nettle removal) on a section of the river near Droxford. By continuing this removal a more diverse bank flora will eventually establish which will greatly benefit the local wildlife
- volunteers have also been making yet more barn owl boxes at the Park's offices in Midhurst and at the Queen Elizabeth Country Park
- the annual battle of reducing the spread of invasive Himalayan Balsam has seen rangers and volunteers concentrating on the upper River Rother area, removing plants before they set seeds. On sites addressed in previous years, reductions (and in places, complete removal) have been noted this year which is very encouraging
- the NPA arranged an inaugural meeting of a new South Downs Invasive Alien Species Partnership. The Partnership agreed to prioritise work on 11 species: Himalayan balsam, giant hogweed, *Crassula*, floating pennywort, Japanese knotweed, *Rhododendron ponticum*, *Cotoneaster*, American mink, water fern, skunk cabbage, and parrot's feather. Monitoring and research on the location/spread of high priority species will be important alongside proposals to reduce proliferation and control the populations.

### **Leaflets and information**

The National Park's annual free newspaper, South Downs View, has been published with 50,000 copies being distributed throughout the Park via a range of outlets and more leaflets about local walks (including the Meon Valley Trail) and 'delicious days out' (highlighting a flavour of local produce available) have also been produced.

The NPA's social media presence continues to grow with topics including promoting a new Miles without Stiles initiative: a new set of walking routes which are suitable for wheelchair users, families with pushchairs, dog walkers with less active dogs and less agile walkers.

All publications can be viewed on the NPA website – [southdowns.gov.uk](http://southdowns.gov.uk) – and many walking routes are now available on a new 'View Ranger' mobile app.

The National Park Authority has also been busy over the summer period attending events including, most recently, the Alresford Agricultural Show and the 'Secrets of the Heath' events in Petersfield. The NPA's stand is always popular with residents and visitors alike, providing a valuable opportunity for the Authority to outline its work, to answer questions and listen to suggestions and ideas from the public, and to describe recreational and volunteering opportunities to people.

### **New horse-riding leaflet**

There are 1,200km of bridleways the National Park providing opportunities from gentle trots along country tracks to a longer hacks up on top of the downs. The National Park Authority has worked with the British Horse Society to produce a new leaflet ([Horse Riding in the South Downs National Park](#)) which includes a map, details of some horse box parking sites, tips on responsible riding and links to other useful websites.

## **TAG airspace change proposals**

The NPA is collating information to put together a response to the current consultation exercise. The NPA suspects that more flights directed on a more concentrated path and at lower altitudes over the South Downs will have an impact on the tranquillity of the National Park. The NPA also has concerns that the proposals will enable increased air traffic above the South Downs for flights approaching Gatwick.

## **Sustainable Communities Fund**

As well as continuing to be a member of the NPA's Planning Committee, I am 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/>

## **Local contacts**

- Natalie Fellows, the Planning Link Officer for Hampshire parishes, can be contacted via: 07872 410442 and [natalie.fellows@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto: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 the new Countryside & Policy Manager, Nigel James ([nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk)) or the new Lead Ranger Elaina Whittaker-Slark ([Elaina.Slark@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:Elaina.Slark@southdowns.gov.uk)) – both of whom will already be well-known to many parishes. Nick Heasman and Dan Oakley have both got new, expanded roles responsible for other parts of the National Park.

*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.*

*Doug Jones, Member of the South Downs National Park Authority and Buriton Parish Council*  
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