

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK

Note for East Hampshire Parish & Town Councils February 2023

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.

Parish Clerks and others receive copies of the SDNPA e-Newsletters (*South Downs News*) and anyone can sign up to have the [newsletter delivered to their inbox](https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/our-work/publications/south-downs-news-the-newsletter-for-the-national-park/) every month. Past issues of the e-newsletter can be read as pdf documents via this link: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/our-work/publications/south-downs-news-the-newsletter-for-the-national-park/>

Parishes should also be receiving copies of the NPA's Planning Newsletter (the most recent edition [Autumn/Winter 2022/23] is available [here](https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/planning-newsletter/)) and others can subscribe to receive these newsletters via this link: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/planning-newsletter/>

The twice-yearly magazine, 'South Downs View', is also likely to be of interest to all communities and the most recent edition [Autumn/Winter 2022/23] can be found [here](#).

To complement the other sources of information referred to above I will highlight the following:

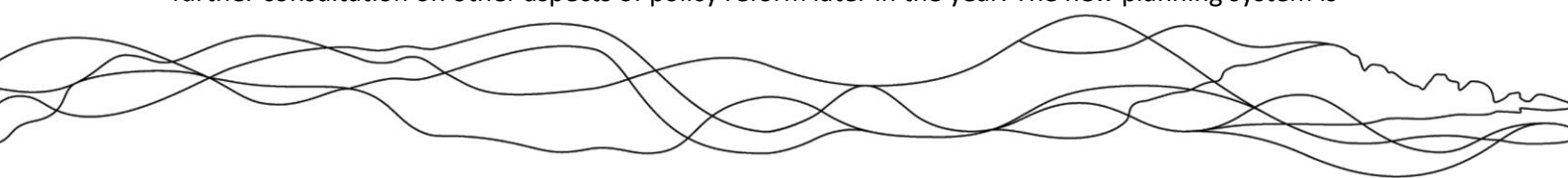
- The South Downs Dark Skies Festival: February 4th to 17th
- SDNPA's response to the Government's current planning reform proposals
- The review of the South Downs Local Plan
- The next Parish Council workshop (Tuesday 21 March)
- SDNPA's budgetary situation
- Farming in Protected Landscapes update
- Funding for local projects
- Local contacts
- The Western Downs Ranger Team.

Dark Skies Festival: February 4th to 17th

The National Park's Dark Skies Festival is currently underway: starting on Saturday 4 February and running until Friday 17th. Now in its sixth year, the popular two-week event celebrates the National Park's status as one of only 20 International Dark Skies Reserves in the world, recognising it as one of the best places globally to experience great views of the stars. As usual the festival features a range of events including nocturnal wildlife walks and stargazing parties. The programme can be seen via [this link](#). There are a number of [live events](#) and there is a short [video](#) about the festival, too. With the theme of "Nature at Night", there is also a special Dark Skies [Discovery Pack](#) which includes advice on where to stargaze, what to see in the night sky, a nocturnal wildlife field guide, downloadable colouring sheets of the planets, tips on making gardens more wildlife friendly and some of the folklore connected to the night sky. Local venues include the Hogmoor Inclosure and the Queen Elizabeth Country Park. Some of the events need to be booked in advance and, as always, many will be dependent on the weather. People are advised to check the SDNPA's website and social media channels on the day of attending any of the stargazing sessions or walks.

SDNPA's response to the Government's current planning reform proposals

As part of the Government's Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill there is currently a consultation about a revised NPPF and potential national planning policy reforms. The consultation ends on 2nd March and consists of a prospectus and a track-changed version of the existing NPPF. There are 58 questions asked, some relating to proposed changes in the NPPF and others relating more to the ideas in the prospectus. The changes to the NPPF are intended to be issued in the spring and there is due to be a further consultation on other aspects of policy reform later in the year. The new planning system is



proposed to go live in November 2024. Changes discussed in the consultation papers include: a marked shift in the policy about housing numbers; a mandatory timetable for plan making; the abolition of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) such as Village Design Statements and Planning Briefs; developments should be built out as soon as possible once planning permission is granted [there are currently about 2,000 homes with planning permission in the National Park that are yet to be built, with only 172 built in the last full year (2021-22)] and some information about the likely national set of Development Management Policies (consultation on the draft policies themselves will follow in due course and it is indicated that there will be scope for some locally specific policies). The National Park's draft response to these consultations can be viewed here: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Agenda-Item-9-NPPF-Consultation.pdf>

Review of the South Downs Local Plan

The original Local Plan was adopted in July 2019 and Government policy requires regular reviews of all Local Plans (at least every five years). The SDNPA has therefore started to review the current plan with the process ummarized in a letter to all Parish Clerks last June and explained at the Parish Council workshop in November. Although the next version of the Plan will not be finalised until 2027, Parish Councils are due to be consulted widely in the meantime so as to feed into the evidence base and provide local information and knowledge to inform the Review. Views and inputs of local communities are likely to be very important, particularly those of parish councils. One way in which parishes are due to be asked to contribute is through a Parish Priority Statement (PPS) which would summarise the principal needs and prevailing views for their local area in a prescribed template. It is likely to be important to gather the views of as many people as possible (those who live, work or visit each parish) and this would help to ensure a PPS carries weight to inform and influence the Review of the Local Plan. As a minimum it is likely that a draft PPS should be published inviting comments from the wider community. Parish Councils may also need to make particular efforts to engage with hard to reach and under-represented groups, including young people. The PPSs would not be part of the Local Plan but they would provide important evidence and could be considered when the Park Authority allocates housing sites etc. Thereafter PPSs could also be a material consideration when planning applications are considered and they could be useful when applying for funding from SDNPA or other bodies. The SDNPA will develop a more detailed timetable for Parish Council engagement and consultation in due course, once there is greater clarity about potential changes to the planning system that are being proposed by the government. More information about the prospective Parish Priority Statements will be explained at the next workshop for Parish Councils, being held on Tuesday 21 March from 6pm.

The next Parish Council workshop

The next workshop for Parish Councils in the Hampshire part of the National Park will be held on Tuesday 21 March. Tea and coffee will be served from 6pm and the meeting will commence at 6.30pm. Topics on the prospective agenda include:

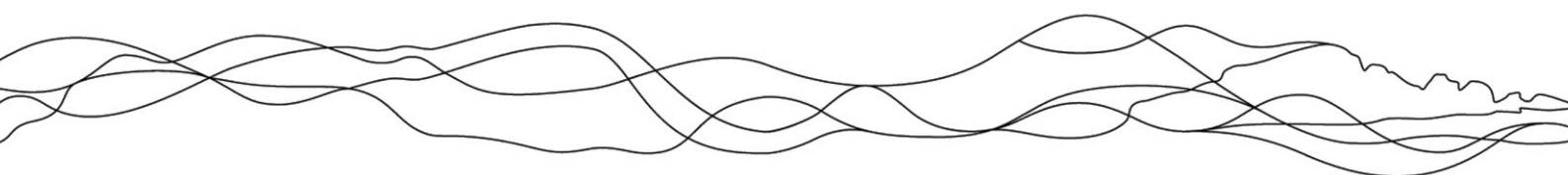
- Parish Priority Statements (as part of Local Plan Review)
- Using community greenspaces to benefit nature and people
- Sharing information and best practice across the National Park

As usual the workshop will end with a question and answer session providing plenty of time to put questions to SDNPA officers.

To book places (a maximum of two places per parish), email

eventbookings@southdowns.gov.uk and provide the name and email address for the representatives from your parish council by 5pm on Monday 13 March. It is intended to provide opportunities at these meetings for communities to share what they are doing with others. There will be a display area so that Parish and Town Councils can display details of local projects which may be of interest to others. If you have anything to share with other parishes or community groups please email eventbookings@southdowns.gov.uk before 5pm on Monday 13 March, or bring it along on the night. Any material presented during the workshops will be made available on the SDNPA website after the workshop.

Previous webinars on Dark Night Skies, Nature Recovery and Climate Change can be viewed via this link: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/national-park-authority/our-communities/parish-webinars/>



SDNPA's budgetary situation

Although Government had promised clarity on the level of the National Park's annual grant from Defra by the end of January, this has not yet been forthcoming and so the Authority is having to press on with developing proposals because the budget for the 2023/24 financial year has to be set soon. As set out in my previous note, yet another year of a 'flat cash' grant settlement from Government is anticipated (making no allowance for inflationary cost increases) and so the SDNPA has had to make £1.1m of savings, including significant staff cuts, less funding for projects, the closure of an area office with the merger of ranger teams and other efficiency savings. Funding for the SDNPA has now fallen by 40% in real terms over the past decade with the Authority receiving £10.486m each year since 2019 (and due to remain the same until at least 2025). The South Downs National Park is the third biggest in England, has the largest population and is among the top 20 planning authorities in the UK (by both geography and volume of applications). Officers and Members are very aware that expectations on the Authority continue to rise as the budget reduces in real terms. National Parks are supposed to be linchpins of the country's nature recovery and climate change targets and they all feel that resources should match ambitions. The SDNPA may decide to spend money from its reserves as a one-off move to try to maintain the momentum of some existing programmes whilst continuing to reduce running costs and to bring in funding from other sources.

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) update

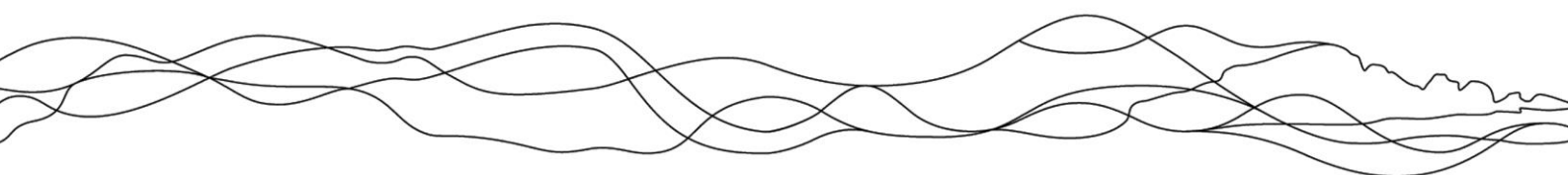
Defra's Environmental Improvement Plan (published in January 2023) includes an extension to the successful FiPL grants programme supporting farmers in the National Park. 'Farming in Protected Landscapes' was due to end after three years in March 2024, but Defra has now confirmed that, owing to the success of the programme so far, it will provide additional funding until March 2025. The SDNPA administers the programme in the South Downs (details are available [here](#)) and has so far supported over 100 projects which help farmers and also achieve national targets for nature recovery and climate change. Projects supported by the Authority have included schemes to help farmland birds flourish and to assist farm diversification during a period of change. The recent announcement means that the SDNPA will be able to work with more farmers to develop some more exciting projects.

Funding for local projects

If your parish has a project that could bring social, environmental, economic or cultural benefits to a community within the National Park and if the project may need some grant funding, you should still consider applying for a Sustainable Communities Grant or CIL funding. I continue to Chair 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. Grants are available for up to 50% of the project cost from £250 to a maximum of £10,000. More information is available [here](#).

Local contacts

The Planning Link Officer for East Hampshire is currently Nat Belderson with contact details 01730 819307, 07917 602373 and Nat.Belderson@southdowns.gov.uk. This may change during 2023 but, in the meantime, Nat is a very useful first point of contact although he will not be able to provide as much in-depth coverage as in the past. The NPA's Western Downs team acts as a 'first stop shop' for land managers and communities, providing advice and support towards achieving National Park 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 Countryside & Policy Manager, Nigel James (nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk) or Lead Ranger Elaina Whittaker-Slark (elaina.whittaker-slark@southdowns.gov.uk).



The Western Downs Ranger Team

Over the last year, the local Ranger team has been working with local communities towards each of the Authority's three main priorities: Nature Recovery, Climate Action and a National Park for All. As part of the Nature Recovery priority, the team is working with 17 of the SDNPA's 'Call for Nature Site' projects, completing site visits to supply advice and funding towards habitat management and management plans for wild flower meadows, woodlands, hedgerows and chalk grassland as well as helping local volunteers with tasks to give initial support for future management. The team has also recently been planting hedgerows, completing chalk grassland restoration and undertaking hazel coppicing with local landowners. In addition there is work with landowners to increase wetlands and water resources for wildlife. This includes a pond by the South Downs Way, restoring a village pond, scrapes for farmland birds and the creation of two ponds within a dry chalk downland habitat. Work has also been undertaken with the County Council's Ranger team to complete some of the chalk downland restoration at Hillhampton as part of the National Grid Buster Hill enhancement project. To meet Climate Action targets the Team is moving to battery powered tools (brush cutter and chainsaw so far) when power tools need replacing and have changed the petrol fuel to the cleaner and more environmental friendly aspen fuel. A group of volunteers has been trained to use scythes as an alternative to power tools on some tasks. As part of the National Parks for All priority, the team is working with a local landowner to install an additional new permissive circular walk within a woodland (which adjoins open access land) and has produced a car-free family cycling leaflet to explore the South Downs from a local railway station. There is also work with a local youth group to introduce them to the South Downs countryside with regular tasks and activities within different habitats. So far they have completed a dead hedge in a woodland, footpath management, heathland restoration, hedge planting as well as an ecological survey and a mindfulness walk. As well as great benefits for mental health and wellbeing, the young people are also learning useful work experience skills and enjoying the new challenges.

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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February 2023

