

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK**

### **Note for East Hampshire Association of Parish & Town Councils Meeting 29<sup>th</sup> November 2017**

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 now receive copies of the SDNPA e-Newsletters (*South Downs News*) and so my notes can be shorter than they were initially. People can sign up here to have the [newsletter delivered to their inbox](#) 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-publications/south-downs-news-the-newsletter-for-the-national-park/>.

To complement recent editions of *South Downs News* I will provide information about the following:

- Update about the South Downs Local Plan
- Protecting our water supplies
- “Go South Downs” – car-free trips
- Customer Surveys
- New South Downs National Park Trust
- Funding for local projects
- Other practical help
- Local contacts.

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

Following the well-attended series of briefing meetings for Parish Councils in Petersfield, Midhurst and Lewes in September and October, the consultation period on the ‘Pre-Submission’ version of the Local Plan was concluded on 21<sup>st</sup> November.

The plan, the first ever plan to cover the National Park in its entirety, aims to set a framework for good planning, with an emphasis on the landscape, caring for views and night skies, supporting the local economy, promoting recreation, enabling affordable local housing, and making sure that green spaces are properly valued and cared for.

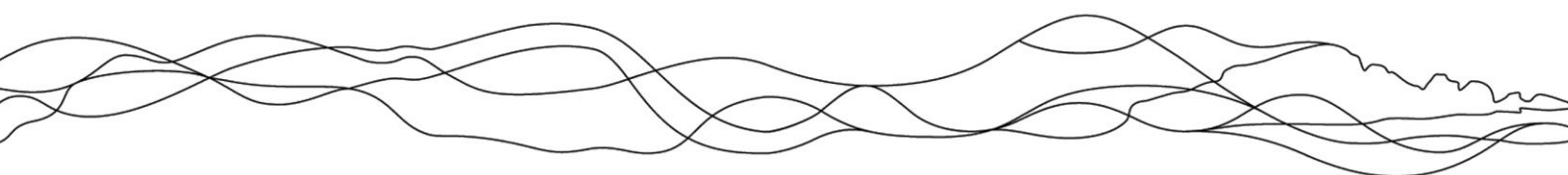
Comments received during the consultation period will be dealt with by a Planning Inspector in the Examination process. After the Planning inspector has produced his / her report about the Examination, it is anticipated that the Local Plan can be adopted in mid-2018.

#### **Protecting our water supplies**

The famous white chalk of the South Downs acts like a giant sponge, soaking up and storing water for 1.2 million people in the south east. But, like many aquifers and rivers across the world, the Downs are increasingly polluted with nitrates – from fertilisers, manure heaps and road run-off etc. If nitrate levels rise above 50mg per litre then the water no longer meets the Drinking Water Standard and can’t be supplied to our homes.

The NPA is now working together with other organisations on a project which aims to protect this precious resource and winter is a particularly vulnerable time when bare fields and higher rainfall can allow the nitrates in the soil to leach through into the aquifer.

So, the project is trialing a new method to help protect our drinking water from pollution: working with farmers on the Brighton chalk block to see whether cover crops can reduce nitrate leaching through the soils and into the aquifer.



It's a relatively simple idea: plant cover crops on otherwise bare winter fields to take up excess nitrates and use them to grow. These plants will hopefully also provide cover for birds, small mammals and invertebrates, reduce erosion and improve the health of the soil. The NPA is working with a local crop sampling company and the University of Brighton to monitor the success of this approach. It seems to have worked in other places and in some countries cover crops are vital in areas where drinking water is particularly vulnerable.

Whilst there have been some indications that cover crops can increase slug numbers (which would be bad news for water as farmers may then need to use more pesticides), there are also reports which suggest that cover crops help to increase numbers of natural slug predators. It is hoped that the trial will help to provide some much-needed evidence and there is news about the project via this website: [brightonchamp.org.uk](http://brightonchamp.org.uk).

### **“Go South Downs” – car-free trips**

In September the NPA launched “Go South Downs”: a new online resource to help people plan car-free trips in the National Park – encompassing places to stay and eat and how to join them together on foot, bicycle or public transport.

The first itineraries to go online were for the market towns of Lewes and Petersfield but visitors can also look out for special ‘Cyclists and Walkers Welcome’ signs in local businesses. These mean that they not only offer a warm welcome but are able to offer facilities ranging from a top-up for water bottles to a safe place to lock up a bike, or even plasters or a puncture repair kit.

It is hoped to expand the scheme to more towns and villages across the National Park but, in the meantime, details can be found by clicking on this link: [Start your adventure now](#).

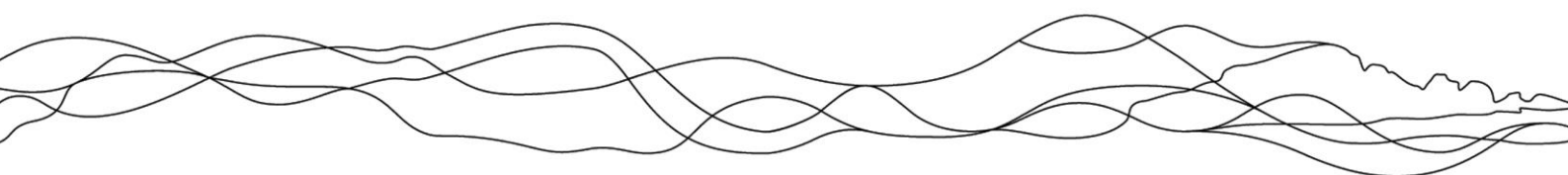
### **Customer Surveys**

The NPA has commissioned a customer satisfaction survey of its planning service which will draw upon planning applicants (and agents), Parish/Town Councils and Local Councillors who have recently used the planning service. The National Park Authority's own research team will also be conducting an online survey of planning consultees. Planning agents who have submitted a planning application to the National Park Authority or recently used the planning service and Parish Clerks may receive an email inviting them to provide details of their experience (either by telephone or email). The results of this research will be used to improve the planning service provided in the National Park by the South Downs National Park Authority or one the ‘host authorities’ which provide planning services on its behalf.

The NPA has also recently set up a citizens panel in order to gather information from local residents and provide a greater understanding about peoples’ perceptions of the Park. There are still many people who don’t know that the National Park exists, don’t get out and benefit from it, or may not treat the landscapes with respect – e.g. not picking up dog mess or following the countryside code. A panel of two thousand completely randomly selected (but representative) people living in, or close to, the South Downs has been set up and will be surveyed twice a year. Panel members will also be invited to sit on smaller groups to test specific work or projects, including before and after campaigns etc. The findings will be used to enhance the work of the Authority and for the benefit of the Park itself and of those who live, work and visit the area.

### **Conferences hosted by SDNPA**

In October SDNPA hosted the NPUK (National Parks UK) Conference which takes place every two years. All 15 UK National Parks sent at least for delegates with additional places being taken by key partners including Defra and DCLG.



Earlier in October the NPA had arranged a major 'Health and Wellbeing' conference, attended by scores of health practitioners, to explore the roles that National Parks can play in encouraging more people to explore the countryside and, potentially, extend their lives and improve their mental well-being as a consequence. NPA officers are working with Public Health England and others to explore the scope for further work.

## **New South Downs National Park Trust**

Hugh Bonneville helped to launch the new South Downs National Park Trust, a charity for the National Park, at the beginning of November.

With current levels of Government funding for the country's National Parks only being protected until 2020, all the Parks are being expected to find new sources of income. One route being explored by a number of them is the establishment of independent Trusts.

The South Downs' Trust will work in partnership with national and community based organisations and raise money to help deliver aspects of the South Downs Partnership Management Plan.

As Margaret Paren, Chair of the SDNPA, has explained: "The National Park Authority and our partners have big ambitions for the South Downs. We want to see more of the land managed for wildlife, more rare habitats protected, more local communities thriving and more people able to access and enjoy the landscapes. This goes far beyond our current funding. The new Trust will help it flourish and stay protected for future generations."

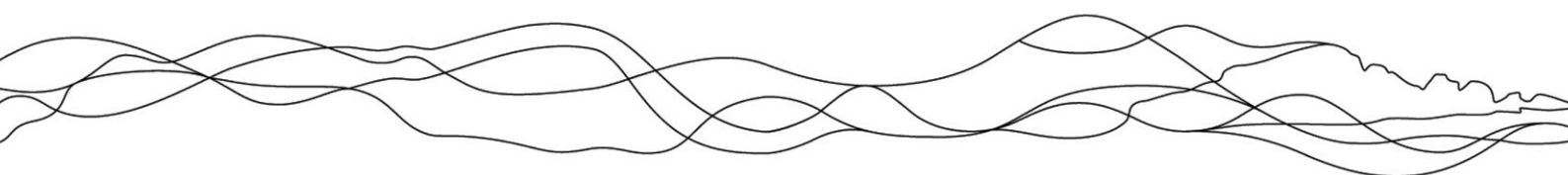
The Trust is independent but is initially being supported by SDNPA staff, helping to ensure that funds raised can be focused on work in the National Park. It will provide a great opportunity for people to give something back, to help care for the National Park and help more people gain access to it and enjoy it.

A new website provides further details: <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/donate/about-the-south-downs-national-park-trust/>

## **Funding for local projects**

What do a wooden bridge over a chalk stream, a Hilaire Belloc novel and a community shop have in common? They're all part of projects supported by the NPA's Sustainable Community Fund (SCF).

- Botany Bay is a tiny chalk valley near Duncton in West Sussex. A Community Interest Group was set up to restore the site, manage it as a nature reserve and open it up for local schools. Lots of rubbish and invasive species had to be removed but after a lot of hard work the chalk stream now runs clear, ancient woodland is recovering, local school children are able to go pond-dipping and thriving river-fly populations reflect improving water quality. This winter, thanks to £10,000 from the NPA's Sustainable Community Fund, an old, unsafe bridge will be replaced and a new outdoor learning shelter built to help open the site up to local primary schools and, in the longer-term, adult courses.
- There are lots of benefits of village life but not having a local shop can be a nuisance – and is particularly difficult for those who don't have access to their own transport. In 2016 the people of Fittleworth responded enthusiastically to a parish survey asking whether the village needed a shop which could also act as a social hub. With planning permission in place, £10,000 of support from the Sustainable Communities Fund, £41,500 raised through the sale of community shares and more fundraising events planned it is hoped to have the store up and open by summer 2018.
- *"A fascinating piece of entertainment... a hymn of praise to the countryside"* is how one local newspaper reviewed Conn Artist Theatre Company's production of 'The Four Men'. Adapted from Hilaire Belloc's book by Sussex Writer Ann Feloy, the play embarked on a tour of venues around the Downs. £2,000 support from the Sustainable Communities Fund was given on condition that a schools resource pack be created and available for teachers on the South Downs Learning Zone.



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 definitely contact the SCF team.

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. 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 practical help

Since my last report (in September) the NPA's Area Team and members of the Voluntary Ranger Service (VRS) have been involved in hundreds of further practical tasks providing thousands of days of volunteer effort and helping to look after the national park, including:

- Supporting a number of School Visits to local farms to help pupils learn about habitats, renewable energy, earth worms and food production
- Carrying out seed harvesting at a local chalk grassland site and spreading the cowslip, yellow rattle and scabious seed at a nearby site which is being managed with the landowner
- Undertaking important River Monitoring Initiative (RMI) Surveys: a national scheme for monitoring the health of rivers. Surveys use a standard net sampling technique to count the number of certain "water quality-sensitive" invertebrates. An overall "score" is then calculated and reductions can indicate problems. In September, low flows on the River Meon lead to low scores which means that the Environment Agency investigate the situation
- Liaising with HCC staff at QECP to discuss the management of Butser Hill and Oxenbourne Down
- Commencing enhancement work on Petersfield's greenspaces, working in Partnership with Petersfield Town Council
- Observing signs that the recently reintroduced water vole population is doing well: there have been reports of Marsh Harriers nesting for the first time since the start of the decline of the water voles and this suggests that the ecosystem is functioning properly again, supporting this top predator.

## Local contacts

The Planning Link Officer role for East Hampshire is still being covered by both Nat Belderson and Hannah Chapman. In the first instance, queries can be sent to Hannah, who will refer to Nat where necessary. [Hannah.Chapman@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:Hannah.Chapman@southdowns.gov.uk) and 01730 819270; [Nat.Belderson@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:Nat.Belderson@southdowns.gov.uk) and 01730 819307.

The Authority's Western Downs team, currently at Empshott, 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 Countryside & Policy Manager, Nigel James ([nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:nigel.james@southdowns.gov.uk)) or Lead Ranger Elaina Whittaker-Slark ([elaina.whittaker-slark@southdowns.gov.uk](mailto:elaina.whittaker-slark@southdowns.gov.uk)), 01730 819340 and 01420 538295 or mobile 07557 923842.

*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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