

SDLMG Chairman's Report for AGM 19 June 2013

The South Downs National Park Authority has to find ways to support and work with land managers in order to achieve its statutory Purposes and Duty.

This means that land managers should be able to work with the Park Authority and with its policies, in ways that benefit our businesses.

Hence the title of this summer's General Meeting, "What can the Park do for you?"

THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

In 2013-14 as in 2012, the most important thing SDLMG can do to help our members, is help ensure the SDNPA gets the Management Plan right, so far as it might affect us. After that it will just be about how the Plan is implemented.

The draft Management Plan is already better because the Executive Committee and members of SDLMG, including NFU and CLA colleagues, have been working effectively with the Park Authority.

- In 2011-12 we helped the Park Authority to agree an appropriate Vision Statement; develop an informative 'State of the Park Report'; and identify the 'Special Qualities' of our landscape which would be the focus of the Management Plan. This was in addition to working on key issues such as access, and helping to win a bid for £600K Nature Improvement Area funding which would not have come to the Park without our support.
- In 2012-13 our biggest challenge was to help the Authority with their drafting of the Management Plan prior to full public consultation (which will start at the end of this month). Many thanks are due to all members who have given their time to participate in workshops, surveys and meetings.

This work is important to us all because if the Park Authority's policies and processes are well informed about what might or might not work for land managers in the South Downs, and written and implemented accordingly, then the Park could bring us new opportunities; otherwise it would just be a source of conflict in the future.

The draft Management Plan is (by popular request) not going to be a huge document. Please could everyone read it and respond personally to the consultation this summer. Please also email me with any comments on it that you think should be mentioned in our organisational response.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR 2012-3

Lead members of our Executive Committee have been liaising with their opposite numbers in the SDNPA, attending quarterly officer liaison meetings, and serving on bodies such as the South Downs Partnership and Technical committees. Comments have been given on a many different policy and process issues; and on the whole the Park Authority has been listening. However at the time of writing some problems we have with key Farming related policies are unfortunately still unresolved; if these are not resolved important aspects of the Draft Plan will not be acceptable.

Work done in Meetings

Much of the business of the EC is done by email but two SDLMG Executive Committee meetings were held in the last year, in October 2012 and April 2013.

In Oct 2012 the main topics of discussion by your Executive Committee were the Sustainable Communities Fund (£400K), and the Nature Improvement Area fund (£600K). This was £1M of funding that was intended to be accessible to the land management community for practical projects in the landscape, as well as to others. In practice this funding was not accessible to our members so we investigated why not.

1. We found that the Authority had not managed to positively market the £400K Sustainable Communities Fund to land managers, and had actually then excluded profit-oriented businesses from eligibility for it. The application process was also off-puttingly complicated.
 - We made these points at a Liaison Meeting with the Park Authority. The scheme was opened up again for profit-making businesses to apply provided that public benefit could be demonstrated. That was a good result as far as it went.
 - But it would take more work on the part of the Park Authority to improve marketing and red-tape aspects of funds such as the Sustainable Communities Fund so that enough of the money will be spent in the best place for the Park, i.e. on the land. Unfortunately the current SCF scheme finishes at the end of 2013 so we do not have that time, but lessons will be learned from this for other future schemes.
2. The SDLMG signed up as a Partner Organisation to the £600K Nature Improvement Area fund in the belief that one of the objectives was to pay land managers or our preferred local contractors to do additional conservation work such as fencing, water supply and tree and scrub management. The Park would not just be getting conservation work done, it would in the process be bringing extra money in to a wide range of local land managers and contractors. Projects would thus be furthering the Park's socioeconomic Duty too, not just Purpose One in isolation.

Unfortunately, the Park Authority approved a Procurement Policy which meant that it could not pay any of this money to farmers or our local contractors to do this work on our own or nearby land. Instead only an extremely small number of contractors could benefit. The Procurement Policy was designed to help the Authority minimise management costs and technically demonstrate best value in the event of an audit. We considered that working through farmers and local contractors, wherever practical, was more likely to deliver real best value.

- We made these points at a Liaison meeting with the Park Authority. Some flexibility was introduced for cases where land managers were not prepared to have the work done by the Park's approved contractors on their land. That was a good result as far as it went, and the NIA fund will have done good work with the funds.
- But we have more work to do to persuade the Park Authority, for future funding schemes, that it is part of their Duty to positively seek to offer more local land managers and contractors the opportunity of paid conservation work, even if this is more difficult for the Park Authority to bring about.

Despite the very good relationship we have with the Park Authority, this kind of detailed difficulty will inevitably sometimes arise with a large new Authority. SDLMG will need to be involved in the earliest stages of scheme development, so as to help ensure the schemes will perform well and real best value will not be undermined by the demands of easy management and auditing.

An encouraging Autumn General Meeting on Planning was held at Boxgrove in November. Tim Slaney spoke about how Planning will work under the Park Authority and encouraged farmers and landowners to inform him (directly or via our planning lead James Youatt) of any difficulties they may experience in the planning process as new systems get under way.

Meanwhile SDLMG responded to the government Consultation on the South Downs National Character Area Assessment, and achieved some improvements to its final form. This will be another important reference document for planning in the Park.

The Executive Committee meeting in April 2013 discussed the draft Management Plan farming policies' reference to 'sustainable farming' and concluded that what is sustainable in farming will change over time and case by case. Attempting to over-define what this means in the South Downs would be a mistake.

EC members were also concerned that understanding of farming issues within the Park Authority could be improved, a concern not helped by the fact that Tom Tupper has been replaced by a non-farmer as a Member of the Authority. SDLMG Officers will continue to discuss the possibility of the Park Authority employing a farming advisor responsible for ensuring that all in the Authority understand and engage with farming issues.

WORKING FOR SDLMG MEMBERS

For your volunteers on Executive Committee to do the work we do on your behalf as well as possible, it is important that we have the right representative mix of volunteers on the Committee. For some key topics such as Planning we have an individual Lead member who takes responsibility. Farming, forestry, and funding streams have in practice been cross-cutting topics involving a number of EC members rather than the responsibility of just one Lead. We will continue to review our Leads structure in the year ahead. In the meantime we would certainly like to have more active farmers on the EC, so please contact me if you are an active farmer and might be interested in being co-opted to the Committee this year.

Communications continues to be mainly by email and we hope we strike the right balance between too much and too little. Andrew Thomas as Communications Lead has developed an improved newsletter format and the aim is to issue this twice a year, with interim mailings where needed. Please contact Andrew or Gwenda if you have comments on how and what we communicate with you. We are in process of updating the SDLMG website. An ever increasing amount of information is also available on the National Park website.

I would like to finish this annual report by thanking all SDLMG members and colleagues for their support and time over the past year, together with our invaluable Administrator Gwenda Tear.

Mike Tristram, SDLMG Chairman, 11.06.2013

Treasurer's report

I am pleased to report that our membership numbers are steady. On the other hand subscriptions are coming in later than they did last year. Please put your £20 subscription on to a Standing Order if you have not yet done so, this is a great help to Gwenda and keeps admin costs down.

The accounts for the calendar year 2012 below show that we have saved over £2,000 on costs compared with budget, much more than the savings we had targeted, approx. half of this being in Administrator time. We are not budgeting to repeat all of this saving in 2013.

	2011	2012 Budget	2012 Actual	2013 Budget (Draft)
Subscription income:	£3,988.86	4,000	£3,735.00	3,000**
SDNPA Admin Grant:	<u>£2,500.00*</u>	<u>2,500</u>	<u>£2,500.00*</u>	<u>2,500*</u>
Total income:	£6,488.86	6,500	£6,235.00	5,500
Administrator costs:	£3,670.04	3,400	£2,469.72	3,200
Meetings hire costs:	£ 739.87	700	£ 275.00	400
Printing & website:	<u>£1,145.82</u>	<u>600</u>	<u>£ 0.00</u>	<u>500</u>
Total outgoings:	£5,555.73	4,700	£2,744.72	4,100
Addition to Reserves:	£ 933.13	1,800	£3,490.28***	1,400

Notes:

* In cash terms, 2010 grant was received with the 2011 grant, and Nov2012 grant not till Apr2013.

** Only £2,875 subscriptions collected to 4 June compared with £3,575 to end April in 2012.

***The £3,490 addition reconciles as: balance at 1.1.2012 was £1,408.50 with £3.5K in the Reserves account; balance at 31.12.2012 was £987.37 with £5K in the Reserves account (& £2,500 grant t/f).

The Park Authority recognizes the value of what we do by contributing £2,500 p.a. to our Admin costs. This means that with subscriptions set at £20, a proportion can be added to the Reserve funds each year. A Reserve of the maximum likely outgoings in one year (benchmark 2011) gives stability. Our 2013 position will be better than this. We intend to use the additional resources to fund a step change in membership levels. Ways of doing so will be discussed in the next Executive Committee meeting and any suggestions from the membership would be welcome.

New Treasurer Officer Role?

The Treasurer's role is still a very small one carried out by the Chairman. Our experience with the SCF and the Nature Improvement Area suggests that it could be helpful if one member took Lead responsibility for working on all new funding streams that may develop in the future, so as to help the Authority get them set up and implemented right for our members. Such a role might possibly sit well together with the Treasurer Officer position. If you are interested in discussing that role, then please contact me.

Mike Tristram, 11.06.2013