

Annual Review

The Society's objective is to conserve and enhance for the public benefit the beauty and amenities of the South Downs in and within the vicinity of the South Downs national park. We work hard to improve access to the Park and take an informed interest in planning policy and planning applications.

As well as providing a comprehensive programme of walks and strolls we take a special interest in access, rights of way and other park initiatives both in the park and in the immediate area.

We are continuing a series of talks on Park subjects, held throughout the National Park area. Contracts are in place with the National Park to replace stiles with gates, the first of which have been completed, and to provide seats along the South Downs Way. The Society has part funded the restoration of a stretch of the South Downs Way between Ditchling Beacon and Lewes that is in very poor condition. The work has now been completed

The Society's Council believe that all these activities ensure that we fulfil our duty in section 4 of the 2006 Charities Act to have due regard to the public benefit guidance published by the Charity Commission.

Summary of our achievements in 2018

Trustees continue to be enthusiastic about raising our profile in the Park and become involved in various projects that will improve access for walkers.

Our rebranding of the Society as the "Friends of the South Downs" whilst retaining our formal company name as the South Downs Society continues to be well received by both members and external bodies.

In order to fulfil our objectives, create a real difference in the park and raise our profile we have:

- Responded to planning, transport and access issues (see below)
- Maintained the walks and strolls programme. This programme continues to be well supported by members, encouraging many onto and around the Downs on walks and strolls that provide a warm welcome to newcomers and regulars alike.
- Agreed with the South Downs National Park trust to replace stiles on paths within the park with kissing gates. This project will enable very many

less mobile walkers to use popular paths that are currently impossible for them to use because they cannot climb over stiles. Our initial commitment is to spend £10,000, which is to be matched by the Trust. The project has proceeded rather more slowly than hoped, with only 2 stiles completed to date, but we are pressing the SDPNA to reach our objective of converting 20 stiles to swing gates per annum. The SDNP Trust are managing the negotiation, administration and practical arrangements for the works, updating us regularly on progress. We are pleased that the SDNPA continues to recognize our support on their Miles without Stiles on their web pages and in other publicity.

- We have also agreed to provide seats on popular paths and in particular on the South Downs Way. We share with the national park authority a dislike of traditional seats, often placed in memory of individuals. Such seats require regular maintenance and can look incongruous in our natural environment. However the SDNPA are to suggest a design using locally felled trees.
- We are pleased with the work done to restore a popular section of the South Downs Way between Ditchling Beacon and Lewes. This 1,300m section of the SDW runs along the crest of the Downs with far reaching views across the Weald. It attracts over 80,000 walkers per year. This section is almost completely flat, but water lying on the track caused the surface to quickly degrade. The Society's £15,000 contribution was matched by £10,000 from the SDNP Trust. The level of the track has been raised above the surrounding fields to allow a camber to shed water off the track. The track has been built up with natural chalk and strengthened with flint.

Our staff have continued to provide support to Trustees and members. Two members of staff resigned in 2018, and one of these vacancies has been filled. One resignation was of our Policy Officer Steve Ankers due to illness. After 11 years with the Society Steve is much missed. Trustees are careful to balance the cost of staff against the benefit of the work they carry out, and all three current members of staff work part time, giving a full time equivalent staff level of 1.5.

Our office manager Alison Jones with her assistants Gill Linturn and Tracey Chaplin manage all finances, membership records, attendance at local shows etc.

Planning and Land Management

Another active year for the Society and its Planning and Conservation Committee responding to planning applications, commenting on local plans, and identifying issues which impact on the South Downs National Park. The experience of Steve Ankers, as coordinator and policy expert, has been greatly missed. We now have a new policy officer in Vic lent but in the interim period, we had to adopt a different way of dealing with planning responses that has placed extra responsibilities on the District Officers and the Administrative team. They have all risen willingly to the challenge.

In 2018 we submitted responses on a wide range of planning applications, from major development called in by the National Park Authority (NPA) to individual small developments handled by local authorities within or adjacent to the National Park, where there appeared to be potential issues of location, design, impact or precedent.

Our Planning and Conservation Committee, currently comprising 15 volunteer District Officers who cover defined areas across East and West Sussex and East Hampshire, has dealt with most of the work on a week by week basis, checking planning lists and keeping watch on local developments. The Committee meets quarterly to share common concerns and projects, covering both planning and conservation matters and members also attend relevant NPA and local authority meetings. The current committee chairman is Nigel Brown. There are still a few gaps in our coverage of the National Park, and the Office would be glad to hear from anyone interested in becoming a District Officer.

Response to the National Park Local Plan dominated 2017 agendas, and there has been further work in 2018, particularly on interpretation of policies and on the Plan's allocation of rural new housing. The Plan has since been submitted for assessment by an Inspector, which took place in November and December and we await the report. We have also made representations for improvement in the "user-friendliness" of planning documents and consultation forms, which are increasingly circulated on-line (with hard copy versions difficult to obtain). In our view the on-line documents need to be easier to read and re-read, and the response forms easier to use and to share with others. Otherwise there is a risk of a growing reluctance to respond and consequent "democratic deficit".

The proposals for improvements to the A27 south coast trunk road have also featured strongly in 2018,

with public consultations over three key sections of the A27 needing attention. All the proposals impinge on the National Park, whether directly in land lost, or indirectly through traffic and environmental impacts. It is also our view that the consultations should not be limited to "highway engineering", but should be widened to address long-term sustainable transport solutions. To this end the Society has continued to be involved in the work of SCATE (South Coast Alliance on Transport and the Environment). Consultants to SCATE have produced a report this year, generating constructive new ideas. We are however aware that, with each unsatisfactory consultation and delay, the A27 traffic increases and the provision of bus services, particularly in rural areas serving the National Park, is regularly cut, as local authorities seek savings.

The Society has responded to a number of Local Authority Plans, including Brighton & Hove, Chichester, Mid Sussex and Wealden, all including substantially increased housing numbers to satisfy Central Government revised targets. Although the National Park is largely spared these pressures, the amount of new housing designated near the borders of the National Park, and often visible from its viewpoints, is of concern to us. Also of concern is the pressure on local authority finances and staffing, with the loss of some experienced Local Government Officers who dealt with planning and enforcement, heritage, rights of way etc. It is a worry to us, as to the NPA, that some delegated functions, important for the protection of the National Park, are now under-resourced.

It has been encouraging to see that some town and parish Neighbourhood Plans, often long in gestation, have now been confirmed and accepted, among these Ditchling, Fishbourne, Lewes, Midhurst/Petworth and Seaford. Hopefully these are encouraging other Neighbourhood Plans in progress in our area, as these are important protections against speculative developments, even if occasionally overridden by local authority plans.

We continue our watching brief over on-going National Park – wide issues, such as oil exploration, minerals, redundant industrial sites, historic properties at risk, conservation areas, and special habitats.

We have also responded to central Government publications and consultations, which may impact the South Downs, including the revisions to the National Planning Framework (NPPF), DEFRA's consultation on "Farming Futures", and the on-going "Glover Review" on special landscapes. BREXIT has caused, and will continue to present, uncertainties, particularly for our area the possible impacts on agricultural economics,

countryside stewardship, and habitat protection. Hopefully all will become clearer as 2019 progresses!

The national “umbrella” organisation for Friends of National Park societies, the Campaign for National Parks (CNP) continues to be a very helpful network to belong to, in order to share experiences and common concerns, to liaise jointly with Central Government, and to campaign together as needed. Our Society continues an active member of CNP.

Our local network of conservation bodies, the South Downs Network, has struggled a bit in 2018, through personnel changes and because the Society unfortunately had to reduce its coordinating secretarial role. Hopefully this is temporary and the Network will resume its important link-up activities and representative role in 2019.

Education and Understanding

Walks coordinator Rosemary Warren and Strolls Coordinator Judy Robinson have once again produced a very impressive programme of walks and strolls, assisted by a large number of members volunteering to be leaders.

Both walks and strolls are well supported by members in the centre of the Park area, but we are concerned about attendance in Hampshire and East Sussex. Future recruitment efforts will be carried out in these areas.

At the end of the year Rosemary stood down from her role, and was replaced by Ian Lancaster. We have recognised Rosemary’s excellent work organising walks over a period of 11 years.

Financial Summary

The Society uses its financial resources to help achieve its charitable objective of protecting the beauty of the South Downs.

During 2018 the Society made a major contribution of £25,000 to the improvement of the South Downs Way and the replacement of stiles with gates. This contributed to expenditure exceeding income by £50,556. The market value of our investments fell by £62,288, resulting in an overall reduction in funds of £112,844. At the year end the Society’s total funds stood at £682,494.

The Society maintains its funds at a level to provide income to support activities which would not otherwise be affordable, to provide grants for projects which are consistent with the Society’s objectives and to allow for the cost of winding up the Society, if that ever became necessary.

Balance Sheet As at 31 December 2018

	2018		2017	
	£	£	£	£
Fixed assets		-		-
Tangible				
Investments		657,744		780,032
Current assets				
Stock	255		321	
Debtors	8,000		8,000	
Cash at bank and in hand	19,489	27,744	10,593	18,914
Creditors				
Amounts falling due within one year		2,994		3,608
Net current assets		24,750		15,306
Net assets		682,494		795,338
Funds				
Restricted funds				5,000
Unrestricted funds		682,494		790,338
Total funds		682,494		795,338

Statement of Financial Activities

For the year ended 31 December 2018

	2018	2017
Income from:	-	-
Subscriptions, donations and legacies	32,473	40,822
Charitable activities	6,387	14,983
Other trading activities	3,768	4,550
Investments	30,038	30,420
Other		267
Total	72,666	91,042
Expenditure on:		
Raising funds	33,162	34,335
Charitable activities	90,060	72,838
Total	123,222	107,173
Net income/(expenditure)	(50,556)	(16,131)
Other recognised gains/(losses)		
Gains/(Losses) on investment assets	(62,288)	29,253
Net movement in funds	(112,844)	13,122
Reconciliation of funds		
Total funds brought forward	795,338	782,216
Total funds carried forward	682,494	795,338