

Annual Review - 2020

Objectives and Activities

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 NPA to replace stiles with gates which the Society has part funded, the first of which have been completed, and to provide seats along the South Downs Way.

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.

Achievements and Performance

We can report a successful and active year, with staff and volunteers making a real difference in and around the national park. Early in the year we welcomed a new Policy Office, Vic lent. Vic provides leadership and direction to all our planning activities and is particularly focussed on helping our many District officers

During the year we once again

- 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.

Our project continues 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 commitment is to spend £10,000, which is being matched by the Trust. We are able to reduce costs as the gates are being fitted by volunteers. They however have a full work load so the job is taking longer than we wished, but many more stile to gate conversions should therefore be possible within our budget.

- We have made great progress with the provision of seats on popular paths and in particular on the South Downs Way. Designs have been agreed with the NPA, and quotations received from suppliers. Installation should be carried out during 2020.

Our staff have continued to provide support to Trustees and members. All three current members of office 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 managed all finances, membership records, attendance at local shows etc.

Planning and Land Management

It has been another active year for the Planning and Conservation Committee responding to planning applications, commenting on local plans, and identifying issues which impact on the South Downs National Park. In 2019 we submitted responses on a wide range of planning applications, from major developments 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.

The Planning & Conservation Committee continued their series of meetings throughout 2019 with, not only a review of planning issues across the Park but also keynote speakers. Following the formal approval of the South Downs National Park Local Plan, the committee was briefed by the National Park's Senior Policy Officer. Other keynote speakers included the President of Sussex Wildlife Trust and the new Chairman of CPRE Sussex.

Access and Rights of Way

The Society is fortunate in having nearly 30 volunteer Area Access Officers who each take responsibility for rights of way and other paths within a specific area. The NPA is much appreciative of the work done by AAOs who regularly walk paths in their areas and report any that are blocked or otherwise available.

Walks and Strolls

Walks coordinator Ian Lancaster 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. Recruitment efforts will be carried out in these areas.

Several walks and strolls this year have been advertised externally to encourage non members to join the walk or stroll and hopefully the Society.

Education and Understanding

A notable feature in 2019 was the extension of our program of talks. 3 talks were arranged all with excellent speakers, attendance of around 100 each time and refreshments generously provided by Waitrose.

During 2019 we developed and secured approval for a project to help school children talk to older people and record their reminiscences about life on the South Downs.

The project is largely financed by the National Heritage Lottery Fund and started in January 2020. It will be based at four primary schools in Bury, Shipley, Findon and Chesswood in Worthing. Teachers will be trained in oral history skills which they will then pass on to pupils in years 5 and 6.

Some of the schools have log books recording daily events going back to Victorian times. These books will be a rich source of information about daily events in those times.

In addition we will use existing oral history records at County Record offices to get more information about life in times gone by.

What we find will be brought together and published on a website so that it's available for everyone.

We also intend to organise walks and other events that will illustrate the history that we uncover.

Services for members

The Downsman magazine and the monthly E-News keep members informed of the Society's activities and concerns. 2020 saw us further increase our social media presence with a greater use of Twitter and Facebook.

Our team of staff are assisted by many volunteers who ensure the smooth running of the society.

Financial review and reserves policy

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

During 2019 the Society's income exceeded its expenditure by £3,796. Income was boosted by the receipt of legacies of £27,791. The market value of our investments rose by £54,388, resulting in an overall increase in funds of £58,184. At the year end the Society's total funds stood at £740,678, including investments of £712,132. At 10 March 2020, the date of completing this report, the Society's investments stood at £640,970, a fall in value of £71,162 or 10% since the year end.

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.

Conclusion

The Society is the third largest National Park Society and compares well with those in other National Parks in its contribution to current policy issues and by what it provides for its

members. Our professional approach in responses to issues continues to achieve a good relationship with the National Park Authority, the Campaign for National Parks and other public bodies.

Statement of Member's Responsibilities

The members of Council are required to prepare financial statements for each financial period which give a true and fair view of the state of the Society's affairs at the end of the financial year and of the Society's net incoming resources for the financial year. In preparing those financial statements, the members of Council are required to select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently; and make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent.

The members of Council are responsible for:-

- a) keeping proper accounting records which disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time financial position of the Society and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the relevant statute;
- b) Safeguarding the assets of the Society and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities; and
- c) Preparing the financial statements on a going-concern basis unless it is inappropriate to assume that the Society will continue to operate

Approved by the Society's Council and signed on their behalf by

David Sawyer - Chairman