

Dr Richard Shaw
Interim Chief Executive
South Downs National Park Authority Establishment Team
Rosemary's Parlour
MIDHURST
West Sussex GU29 9SB

November 2009

FRIENDS OF LEWES EXPECTATIONS OF THE NEW NATIONAL PARK

Can I first thank you for speaking on the subject of the South Downs National Park at our Autumn General Meeting. It was quite clear from the level of interest shown by our members that you stimulated their thinking and moved them on from a campaigning state towards a hopefully very positive new reality.

In the light of the Society's strong interest in the creation of the National Park you invited us to put in writing what our expectations might be. Our main concern is that the National Park Authority should put proportional effort and resources into conserving and enhancing the built environment as it will put into the rural environment. Whilst we obviously plead the case for Lewes the points we make are equally applicable to the other settlements included within the boundary of the National Park, many of which, like Lewes, are of a historic nature. In this connection please bear in mind that the South Downs Joint Committee has not been concerned with the majority of these settlements and thus has no tradition of working to conserve and enhance the urban or built environment or any significant tradition of interpretative work. These are specialist skills, both for officers and members, and will require a much more significant input in the early days of the National Park Authority if a balanced approach to conserving the special qualities of the South Downs is to be achieved.

We have put our expectations into a number of lists which are attached to this letter as an appendix. We have prioritised them because we recognise that some may seem idealistic at the present time, yet as an "in perpetuity" institution the National Park Authority should include them in their forward plans for implementation in the future. On the other hand we would expect to see rapid positive change in other areas so that the people who have supported the creation of the National Park are not disappointed by the result. We hope that this list of expectations gives you a clearer idea of the backlog of conservation and enhancement work that has built up and will help you better gauge the financial requirements of the National Park. In this connection we hope that you will encourage the National Park Authority to seek all types of discretionary monies (both public, private and charitable), over and above the

standard financial formula for National Parks, to enable it to “catch-up” in management terms with what the other National Park Authorities have already achieved.

We also trust that you will give full consideration to recommending that the town of Lewes should either be the headquarters of the National Park Authority or at least host a sizeable Divisional office. It is a sustainable gateway with excellent road and rail communications and already hosts the headquarters of East Sussex County Council, Lewes District Council, Sussex Police Authority and Sussex Archaeology Society. Natural England already have an office in the town which, inter alia, deals with South Downs National Park issues and it would thus be logical for the National Park Authority to be in close proximity.

We also consider that day to day development control issues, other than minerals and waste, should largely be delegated back to the existing local authorities in order to relieve the National Park Authority of much detailed work. However it will be necessary for precise service level agreements, which emphasise the special nature of the National Park, to be agreed with these authorities and provision included for the National Park Authority to “call-in” important or controversial proposals. Should such a scheme of delegation prove unworkable in the long term interests of the National Park then the National Park Authority must reserve the right to take these planning functions back in house.

A further request is that the National Park Authority should take over the existing excellent countryside management service of the South Downs Joint Committee. In addition, to ensure that it can properly deliver the second recreational purpose of a National Park and provide a consistent “best value” approach throughout, it should seek to have delegated to it by the four highway authorities the full rights of way function.

A final point is that as a great volume of support for the South Downs National Park has come from the centres of population the people living in these communities have high expectations of an improved planning/conservation/enhancement regime once the National Park Authority takes on its responsibilities.

Robert Cheesman
Chairman

APPENDIX

Part A – Immediate issues for the National Park Authority to implement.

1. An appropriately experienced team of Conservation Officers capable of dealing with both the pressure to alter, and the need to enhance, the built environment.
2. Up to date Management Plans for Conservation Areas with adequate funding for their implementation.
3. Strong pressure being brought to bear on all public and quasi-public authorities who have a duty to take National Park purposes into account to pay far more than lip-service to such duties. This is particularly relevant in relation to the Local Development Frameworks being prepared by local authorities.

Part B -Medium term issues for the National Park Authority to implement.

4. The re-introduction of Conservation Area grant schemes to aid appropriate maintenance and help private owners take enhancement initiatives including churchyard maintenance.
5. Making Lewes a sustainable gateway town for the eastern downs with high quality interpretation of the cultural links between the town and the Downs as well as the cultural history of the town itself including its bonfire tradition, the Tom Paine connection and the historic Reeves photographic collection.
6. Good clear design guidance especially for shop-fronts and advertising. Ideally, the encouragement of the replacement of three-dimensional hanging shop signs that were once a characteristic of the High Street.

Part C - Issues which involve the National Park Authority persuading others to have regard to National Park purposes.

7. There should be clear signage of the footpaths and bridleways leading to the Downs whilst at the same time the town itself should be signposted from the South Downs Way National Trail.
8. All the pavements and road surfaces in a Conservation Area to be well maintained and where inappropriate materials have been used in the past for these to be replaced by locally distinctive pavements, flags, kerbing and guttering. This is particularly relevant in key historic streets like Castlegate and Keere Street.
9. Removal of all unnecessary road signage.
10. All the historic twitten walls to be restored and well maintained.
11. Establishing a training programme in historic building skills – lime putty work, flint work etc.
12. All overhead lines and cables – electricity, power, telephone and cable television- to be undergrounded including those across the downs near Offham and running down the Ouse Valley.
13. The provision of modern cable TV so that all the rooftop aerials can be removed. This could probably be linked to the making of Lewes a Wi-Fi zone.
14. A major tree planting programme - plus ongoing planting and maintenance – which makes Lewes an urban arboretum.

15. All street lighting to be appropriately designed to fit-in within the Conservation Area and switched off wherever and whenever sensible possible so as to restore the dark night sky.
16. A traffic management scheme to reduce the dominance of the car and allow for much more walking and cycling within Lewes – this would include off-road cycleways.
17. Ensuring that all roads (particularly the Lewes by-pass) have “whisper-tarmac” surfacing to enhance the tranquillity of the National Park.
18. A more comprehensive recycling scheme.
19. To protect the built environment from flash flooding the co-ordinated street sweeping and drain clearance/improvement programme should be strengthened and a more thorough approach taken to litter management – including keeping rivers clear of debris such as shopping trolleys etc.
20. The only natural chalk stream in Lewes - the Winterbourne - is presently enclosed in a concrete gutter. It should either be restored to its natural state or more appropriate material used and the water abstraction that presently limits its flow reduced.
21. The natural floodplains both to the south and north of Lewes should be re-instated in order to protect the historic built environment from damage whilst at the same time restoring the winter wetland habitats.
22. A major enhancement scheme for the river frontages including public access and making provision for a revival of the recreational use of the river by boats.
23. Pressing for the re-opening of the Lewes – Uckfield railway.
24. A weekly, rather than monthly, farmers/local produce market.
25. Maintenance of the County Records Office in the Town.
26. The recognition by all authorities that ‘Bonfire’ is a key historic cultural component of the specialness that led Lewes to be included in the National Park. Thus less suppression and more encouragement.