



Siôn McGeever
Chief Executive Officer
South Downs National Park Authority
Midhurst

8th December 2025

Dear Siôn

Planning in Lewes

It has come to the attention of the Friends of Lewes Executive Committee that the delivery of the planning service within the town of Lewes, and those other parts of Lewes District that are within the National Park, is to change from 1st April 2026. We learnt about this, not from any notification, but from the news page of the SDNPA portal.

Up until 1st April the latest version of the SDNP Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) - version 6 dated November 2024 confirms that 'To maximise use of resources and maintain local engagement and involvement, the SDNPA will work in partnership with the local authorities covering the National Park to deliver the planning service and that accordingly legal agreements have been in place since 2011 with five of the authorities ('host authorities'): Chichester, East Hampshire, Horsham, Lewes and Winchester'. It is unclear why the Lewes and Eastbourne partnerships are not to continue as it is our understanding that all the others, closer to Midhurst, are to remain in place.

In transferring all planning decisions from Eastbourne and Lewes District, the SDNPA has opted to assume control over the areas furthest and most remote from the Park's hub. Distance is inevitably accompanied by lack of familiarity and absence of local knowledge. This has been clearly evidenced at planning meetings by the comments and questions of both committee members. What is now unclear is how local engagement and involvement is to be maintained?

Para 4.2 of the SCI highlights the importance of the involvement of the community and stakeholders at an early stage of the decision-making process. It acknowledges that this is more likely to deliver development which meets the needs and aspirations of communities, whilst ensuring that the statutory purposes of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) are adhered to. We would be interested to understand how this is to be continued with the new arrangements, particularly for bodies like ourselves. We have a distinguished and proud record of providing regular professional comment on planning applications supported by qualified architects, planners, urban designers and an arboriculturist, together with others who have specialist knowledge, skills and a deep local understanding. This critical role has been acknowledged by the SDNPA, along with the monitoring of development in the town, so that breaches of planning control are raised at the earliest opportunity to avoid irreversible harm to the historic fabric of buildings and the opportunity for immediate enforcement action. We would appreciate clarity on how the important relationship is to be maintained from Midhurst.

Lewes based planning and conservation staff were seen as being critical to the assessment of the quality of new development within the town and monitoring the sensitivity with which alterations to the historic fabric are carried out (Lewes Conservation Area Management Plan 2013). Throughout the time they have been operating the local planning service they have been rigorous in upholding the key planning policies to protect and enhance the conservation area. The rigour in which they have applied the policies of the Local plan and other policies has been shown in their successes. Of particular note is the important assessment work undertaken in the Gail's bakery case where the appeal in respect of the retention of unsympathetic doors, was soundly dismissed by the planning inspector. We don't see the same rigour in the way Midhurst officers' approach similar cases, highlighted by the recent determination of the houses behind the White Hart Hotel, so we have particular concerns. Key to the Lewes officer approach is their weekly drop-in surgeries providing ready accessibility to developers, builders and householders. It is vital that this continues and we look for details of how this is to be maintained.

In para 4.6 of the SCI, it is indicated that, the host authorities will continue to provide the pre-application service on behalf of the SDNP, but presumably this will now be amended along with the arrangements under paragraph 4.9, where in order to operate a transparent service, pre-application responses will be placed on the online planning register at the point of which a relevant formal planning application is received and validated by the Authority?

We are still very unhappy with the SDNPA decision not to make pre application submissions public at the outset which indicates a absence of transparency but also prevents a helpful input from the local community which can draw on local knowledge about the use of land and important issues, constraints and opportunities.

In the press release dated 14th November there is reference to a number of successes being achieved within those parts of Lewes District since 2010 'including strong neighbourhood planning, much-needed affordable homes and the creation of new wildlife havens. Within Lewes we remain disappointed that so few badly needed affordable homes have been provided during the SDNPA tenure, that they have consented the removal of sixty protected trees adjacent to Phoenix Causeway and approved development acknowledged to be harmful to the landscape setting of the town and the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. We look for any new arrangements to address these issues.

Of particular concern to the people of Lewes and also the surrounding area is what this will mean for the future and we would appreciate some early indication on how the SDNPA intend to achieve smooth and efficient transfer of work from the local area to Midhurst. In particular how the authority will ensure decisions affecting local people are made locally. The Chair of the Planning Committee set the tone for the consideration of the White Hart application when she expressed surprise that, despite the objections, no one had made the effort to come across to Midhurst to speak at the committee. There were two Lewes items on the agenda plus the consideration of the East Dean and Friston Neighbourhood Plan. In these respects, all the decisions would largely of concern to residents in the eastern part of the park. No consideration was given to moving the meeting to a more convenient location such as Lewes.

This situation reflects a complete absence of empathy in regard to the difficulties of making the journey to Midhurst both in terms of cost and time. For people without cars the peak time week day journey is both expensive and time consuming. Also, we know from our own experience that little or no benefit is derived from making representations at the meetings because members rarely pick up on the issues raised, and if they do, they give no weight to them when it comes round to making the decision. This is why people have made reference to the autocratic and unsympathetic approach to the determination of planning applications at planning committees. The absence of local representation for the largest town in the National Park doesn't seem to help the situation and put simply means, we have no voice.

We hope this is helpful in setting out not only our concerns, but those of others in this part of the National Park and trust that these points will be taken into account to ensure the social well-being of the local communities is maintained.

Yours sincerely

Ruth

Ruth O'Keeffe
Chair of Friends of Lewes

Roger

Roger Maskew
Chair of Planning Committee

cc Cllr Emily Clarke – Mayor of Lewes
Mr David Attwood – CAAG
Mr Martain Small, Friends of the South Downs