

South Downs Campaign

Support for a South Downs National Park

1 The South Downs Campaign

- 1.1 The South Downs Campaign (SDC) is a network of over 80 very varied, mostly non-statutory, national, regional and local groups and organisations which strongly support the creation of a South Downs National Park¹.
- 1.2 The SDC has been campaigning for a National Park for the South Downs since its formation in 1990². Some of its member groups have been campaigning for this a lot longer and others, such as the Society of Sussex Downsmen and CPRE, were formed in the early part of the 20th century out of concern for the future of the South Downs and the threats the area faced.

2 The National Park: Meeting the criteria

- 2.1 The SDC believes the South Downs deserve the best possible protection to ensure that its special landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage are conserved and enhanced for current and future generations to understand and enjoy.
- 2.2 The SDC considers that the South Downs meet all the statutory criteria for a National Park.
- 2.3 The SDC maintains that previous decisions that ruled against a South Downs National Park were flawed³.
- 2.4 Downland, cliffs, Weald and river valley unite to form sequential landscapes of outstanding natural beauty, inextricably linked to, and moulded by each other. Their very special qualities have long been recognised. The differences between the South Downs and the North Downs, Chilterns and Cotswolds are discussed in Annex 2⁴.
- 2.5 The South Downs are a highly-valued, extensive tract of countryside providing significant opportunities for a superior open-air recreation experience within close proximity to millions of people in southern England. Through the ages, this combination of factors has inspired numerous famous artists, poets and writers to extol the virtues of the landscape, while it has inspired many others to come and settle here, many of whom have left behind a rich legacy⁵.

¹ SDC Biography – Inquiry Document No: 3275/1/1

² SDC Biography – Inquiry Document No: 3275/1/1

³ Annex 1 – The History National Park Proposals after World War II – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁴ Annex 2 – The Specialness of the Proposed South Downs National Park by Dr Peter Brandon – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁵ Annex 3 – A Snapshot of the Cultural Heritage of the South Downs by The Ramblers’ Association – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

3 The National Park: Why it is especially desirable

3.1 The wider picture

- 3.1.1 The south east of England forms part of the European ‘hot banana’ which is an area of high economic growth. The combination of valued lowland landscapes described above are highly vulnerable in this context, not only to development pressures, but also to the increase in recreational visits from the rising population in the region. Without a strong, securely funded and independent body, able to plan for the long term, the area risks being irreparably damaged. A National Park Authority would bring many benefits, including opportunities for the conservation and/or restoration of important landscapes and habitats in partnership with local, regional and national bodies. This would principally be done through the fulfilment of its statutory duties, which include delivering National Park purposes and seeking to foster the economic and social well being of the National Park’s local communities.
- 3.1.2 The SDC believes that the importance of a high quality environment will increase in an ever crowded and frenetic south-east region. These pressures only intensify the need for a National Park with a National Park Authority to manage it.

3.2 The possible alternative

- 3.2.1 The Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) was set up in 1992 to manage the Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This followed the establishment of the East Hampshire AONB Joint Area Committee (JAC) in 1991. Because of its experimental nature, as a possible precursor to other such boards to manage other AONBs, the SDCB has received substantially greater funding from central government than other bodies managing other AONBs.
- 3.2.2 Although initially set up as a 6 year experiment the SDCB has had two, 3- year extensions and is about to have a third extension to maintain it to 2007. The Board now works increasingly closely with the East Hants AONB JAC on South Downs issues. The two bodies are currently preparing a joint interim Management Plan.
- 3.2.3 It has been suggested that a South Downs Conservation Board should be established under the CROW Act in preference to a National Park, on the basis that the SDCB and the East Hampshire AONB JAC do a sufficiently good job. Whilst the SDCB has improved the management of the Sussex Downs and has done a reasonable job within its limited powers and budget, there are many issues that it is failing to tackle. Indeed the SDCB has acknowledged many of these issues itself.
- 3.2.4 One major concern of the SDC is the SDCB’s lack of planning powers. The area designated as a South Downs National Park is subject to 3 Structure Plans and 12 Local Plans. Within a plan-led system, discrepancies between so many plans has led to inconsistencies in key policies. The SDC will present further evidence to the Inspector on this issue in subsequent Proofs of Evidence. It is particularly noteworthy that around 40% of planning applications that the SDCB has objected to were approved by local planning authorities without all the Board’s concerns being

addressed⁶. It is not only major developments which can adversely affect the area, the SDCB is also concerned about the cumulative impact of small-scale development.

- 3.2.5 The SDC therefore submits that the SDCB, even if extended to cover the whole of the South Downs and reconstituted as a CROW Act Board, would still not have sufficient powers or funding to carry forward into the future the measures necessary to safeguard the future of this high value landscape⁷. The SDC further submits that it is especially desirable that the designation order is confirmed and a South Downs National Park Authority established quickly.

4 The Designation Process

- 4.1 The SDC congratulates the Countryside Agency on the manner in which it has conducted the designation process. It has provided the first full and rigorous reconsideration of the area, including the two AONBs since their designation. The SDC considers that this was a necessary process, and enabled changes in natural beauty since AONB designation to be considered.
- 4.2 Throughout, the process has been open and inclusive and has engaged fully the residents of the designated area as well as regular visitors to it. Overwhelmingly, the public has supported designation not only in the formal consultation process but also at public meetings and in surveys, often conducted by local authorities⁸. The SDC considers that the local authorities who are appearing at the public inquiry in opposition to a National Park are doing so without the support of their electorate. The SDC is particularly concerned about the misrepresentation of public meetings and expressions of public support. For example a meeting in Eastbourne that is referred to by Nigel Waterson MP⁹ was the one chaired by David Dimbleby and attended by 300 people. By the end of the meeting, after hearing speakers with differing views on the future of the South Downs, three-quarters were in favour of a National Park.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 The SDC maintains that the South Downs have always met the statutory criteria for a National Park and that previous decisions were fundamentally flawed. It considers that the existing bodies managing the South Downs are carrying out their functions as best they can but lack the powers, independence, funding and long term security that a National Park would bring. The South Downs is under increasing pressure and the SDC considers that the most effective body to conserve and enhance the South Downs for future generations is a National Park Authority.
- 5.2 Overall, the South Downs will be a unique and valuable addition to the National Park family and the SDC fully supports the Countryside Agency on its progressing of the South Downs National Park.

⁶ Annex 4 – SDCB Executive Committee Report 6 June 2000, Agenda Item No. 7 – Analysis of Consultations Monitored – Report by the Sussex Downs Officer, para 2.3 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁷ Annex 5 – Why it is ‘Especially Desirable’ to Confirm the Designation of the South Downs as a National Park by Paul Millmore – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁸ Annex 6 – Public Support for a South Downs National Park – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁹ Nigel Waterson MP for Eastbourne’s public inquiry submission, para 15 – Inquiry Document No: 2476/1/1