

Report to: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 27 June 2017
By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport
Title: Countryside Access Strategic Commissioning Strategy
Purpose: To note the results of the public consultation and for Cabinet to approve the Countryside Access Strategy

RECOMMENDATIONS: Cabinet is recommended to:

- (1) Note the results of the public consultation in relation to the draft strategy;
 - (2) Agree the continuation of discussions with external groups in relation to future ownership/management of countryside sites; and
 - (3) Approve the strategy and to delegate the implementation stage of the strategy to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment.
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1. Background Information

1.1 In March 2014, the Economy, Transport and Environment (ETE) Scrutiny Committee endorsed the development of a commissioning strategy for public rights of way (PRoW) and countryside sites (CS) management. The ETE Scrutiny Committee formed a Review Board which worked alongside officers and commented on the development of the draft strategy throughout the strategic commissioning process. This led to the creation of a draft strategy (Appendix 1).

1.2 In April 2016, Cabinet agreed that the draft strategy be consulted on for a 12-week period. That consultation took place from May to July 2016 and the results are summarised below and in Appendices 2 and 3 in more detail. Full copies of the consultation responses are available in the Member's Room.

1.3 The ETE Scrutiny Committee received an update on the draft strategy at its meeting on the 14 June 2017. The ETE Scrutiny Committee supports the proposals for the future management of Rights of Way and proposals for the transfer of Countryside Sites contained in the draft strategy.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The County Council, as Highway Authority, has a statutory duty to ensure that the PRoW network of 2,000 miles is accessible and maintained. The County Council is also responsible for 10 countryside sites (including Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves) totalling 1,160 hectares. The County Council also has a duty to ensure safe public access to these sites.

3. Countryside Access Strategy - summary of survey responses – September 2016

3.1 In total, there were 386 responses to the Countryside Access Strategy survey and consultation. These responses will be used to inform the conclusion of the strategy. The results are summarised below:

3.2 **The strategy:** The 'needs', 'vision' and 'strategic outcomes' detailed in the draft strategy were all given good levels of support by respondents (ranging from 69%-96%.)

3.3 **Rights of Way (RoW):** The proposal for RoW management to remain in-house received strong support (80%) and only 4% of respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with this proposal. Common themes in the narrative comments were for an increase in enforcement and landowner liaison, as well as more engagement with volunteers.

3.4 **Countryside sites (CS):** Just over half (56%) of respondents supported the proposal to transfer the maintenance of the countryside sites to other organisations. 16% strongly disagreed or disagreed, with 27% of respondents stating they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' or 'didn't know.' Of the 27% some respondents wished to see further detail in relation to the specific future management of some countryside sites.

3.5 The three sites eliciting the majority of responses were Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve, Seven Sisters Country Park and Weir Wood Local Nature Reserve.

3.6 In regards to Chailey Common, many respondents were happy with East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) current management and strongly objected to the transfer of this arrangement to others. Several commented that the strategy does not give detail as to how the site would be managed in the future with other partners.

3.7 Seven Sisters Country Park was also seen as an iconic and very important site for the County. Many felt it should remain under ESCC management. Others believed that ESCC was not making the most of the opportunities that came with the site.

3.8 Several respondents felt that Weir Wood Local Nature Reserve currently works well with ESCC management and that, if the management is passed to others, suitable organisations to support the 'friends of' group may not be available.

3.9 General comments from Local Authorities and key stakeholders: The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), Eastbourne Borough Council, Lewes District Council, Wealden District Council (WDC) and several Parish Councils supported in-house management of Rights of Way. Other District Councils did not offer a strong view.

3.10 The SDNPA agreed with Countryside Sites being passed to other organisations. The Authority is also interested in taking on Countryside Sites. Only WDC strongly disagreed with this proposal.

3.11 Comments from the majority of key stakeholders supported PRoW remaining in-house, whilst around half voiced concerns in relation to handing over Countryside Sites, particularly in relation to the specific day to day management. Most felt more should be made of volunteering opportunities.

4. Next Steps

4.1 The majority of the consultation feedback is positive, therefore, Cabinet are recommended to approve the strategy. Cabinet are also asked to delegate the strategy's implementation stage (e.g. potential arrangements for the handover of sites) to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment.

4.2 Due to the consultation taking place during the summer, discussions with potential partners (who may be interested in taking over management of CS) have not yet progressed beyond the initial 'expressions of interest' stage. No detailed assessment, therefore, of what potential partners can offer has yet been carried out. Subject to Cabinet agreement, officers will continue initial discussions with external groups to assess what may or may not be possible in terms of transferring Countryside Sites. This assessment is key, as the draft strategy also states that the Countryside Sites would not be passed to partners if this was not found to be financially viable for the County Council. The organisations with experience in community involvement, conservation and visitor engagement that Officers have had initial discussions with include the Sussex Wildlife Trust, National Trust and South Downs National Park Authority.

5. Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 Cabinet is therefore recommended to:-

5.1.1 note the results of the public consultation in relation to the draft strategy;

5.1.2 give approval to officers to continue initial discussions with external groups; and

5.1.3 approve the Countryside Access Strategy and to delegate the implementation stage of the strategy to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

ALL County Council Members will have PRow in their electoral divisions

The below table sets out the County Council Members that have countryside sites in their electoral divisions.

Site	Local councillor
Camber Sand Dunes/Johnson's Field	Cllr Keith Glazier
Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Jim Sheppard
Cuckoo Trail	Cllr Gerald Fox
	Cllr Bill Bentley
	Cllr Colin Swansborough
	Cllr Rupert Simmons
	Cllr Daniel Shing
	Cllr Bob Bowdler
	Cllr Nick Bennett
Ditchling Common Country Park	Cllr Jim Sheppard
Forest Way Country Park	Cllr Francis Whetstone
Ouse Estuary Nature Reserve	Cllr Darren Grover
Riverside Park	Cllr Sarah Osborne
Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)	Cllr Stephen Shing
Shinewater Park	Cllr Alan Shuttleworth
	Cllr Colin Swansborough
Weir Wood Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Francis Whetstone

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 1 – Verbatim comments from consultation survey
- 2 – Consultation Survey
- 3 – List of consultees