

Committee:	Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment
Date:	16 July 2018
Report By:	Director of Communities, Economy and Transport
Title of Report:	Countryside Access Strategic Commissioning Strategy: Progress Update
Purpose of Report:	To outline options identified and request approval of the proposed approach for assessing options, decision-making and project completion

RECOMMENDATIONS: Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) Note progress and the options available for the future management of the eight countryside sites; and**
 - (2) Approve the recommended approach for assessing options, decision-making and completion of the project.**
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1. Background Information

1.1 In June 2017, Cabinet approved the Countryside Access Strategy (CAS), which proposed that eight of the ten countryside sites owned and/or managed by East Sussex County Council (ESCC) would be considered for transfer to suitable external organisations. Cabinet agreed for discussions with external groups in relation to these countryside sites to continue and delegated the implementation stage of the strategy to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The benefits of reviewing the management of the ESCC countryside sites are to:

- (i) improve the facilities, visitor and volunteer experience as well as wildlife conservation outcomes and contribution to the local economy of the countryside sites in line with the Countryside Access strategy;
- (ii) mobilise resources for investment and to ensure there is a sustainable financial basis for the future management of the sites; and
- (iii) make best use of our limited resources.

It is proposed to complete this in three phases of:

- (1) targeted marketing and in-house business planning;
- (2) evaluation and analysis of options, business case development, scrutiny and decision-making; and
- (3) execution of decision with completion of transfer(s) and/or implementation of in-house business plan.

Phase 1 Progress

2.2 The current Phase has continued discussions with The National Trust (NT), South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) and Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) and with other suitable organisations that expressed interest during the previous public consultation. Local opinion has also been gathered through meetings with Parish Councils involving County Councillors and others. A series of site-specific assessments on public access, conservation, health and well-being, legal aspects, and site income and expenditure have been completed. Potential options have been documented through (a) completion of site interest forms by interested parties outlining their specific interest, plans for future management and finance, and other issues and (b) drafting of an in-house business plan.

2.3 Two sites - Camber Sands and Shinewater Park - currently have no interest from external organisations while six sites have interest (see Appendix 1) as follows:

- The NT and SDNPA have expressed interest in the freehold of Seven Sisters Country Park and in working in partnership with other organisations to manage the park;

- The SWT has expressed interest in a leasehold arrangement for the management of Ditchling Common Country Park and Ouse Estuary Nature Reserve, to provide an option for an increased role in the management at Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and Weir Wood LNR, and to work in partnership with the County Council and/or others in the management of Camber Sands, Riverside Park, Shinewater Park and, in particular, Seven Sisters Country Park;
- Newhaven Town Council has expressed interest in the leasehold of Riverside Park and the freehold, leasehold or cooperation in the management of Ouse Estuary NR;
- The Kitesurf Centre, a tenant at Broomhill Sands, has expressed interest in the freehold or a lease to improve site facilities and expand its business at Broomhill Sands.

2.4 It therefore does not appear possible to transfer all sites to one or more organisations and so a mixed solution may be required with some continued involvement from ESCC.

2.5 Meetings and assessments have also highlighted the need to (a) address management arrangements around Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve as a requirement for effective future management and (b) consider the importance of monitoring of Riverside Park as a former landfill site, which will be continued by ESCC such that the freehold is likely to remain with ESCC.

2.6 The in-house business plan presents an option for the County Council to continue management of some or all countryside sites that focuses on increasing revenue and delivering a quality service that is financially viable for the County Council. It may be possible to combine this option with the interest from external parties, which would require further discussion and negotiation.

Proposed Approach for Phase 2

2.7 In Phase 2, officers will complete a detailed evaluation of proposals and an analysis of the following options against the benefits outlined in 2.1 and the Countryside Access Strategy. Option 1 will be the transfer of all sites subject to interest from suitable external organisations, with the remainder being managed by ESCC. Option 2 will be for all sites to remain managed in-house with cooperation and lease arrangements with other organisations. Option 3 will be one or more mixed models that combine site interest from external organisations with ESCC management at different sites. The outcomes will be considered at the site and estate (i.e. across all sites) level for each option.

2.8 This options analysis will be completed based on a technical evaluation by ESCC specialists not directly involved in the management of the sites, which will take into account the views of a Place Scrutiny Committee Review Board. This analysis will result in a preferred option that will be discussed and agreed with the relevant external parties (as appropriate) and the development of a business case. This business case will form the basis of a recommendation to be presented to the Lead Member for a decision before the end of this year.

3. Staffing Issues

The implications of any transfer and/or the implementation of the in-house business plan will affect existing staff either through the need for TUPE arrangements or a potential change in role. Detailed plans will be completed as necessary in consultation with affected staff in Phase 2.

4. Financial Issues

Management of the ten countryside sites has on average cost the County Council an estimated £60,754 per annum over the period 2013-2017. A major source of income is Seven Sisters Country Park, which subsidises the management of the other sites. Transfer of the six sites identified in paragraph 2.3 above would leave net costs of £49,854 to manage the remaining sites based on past income and expenditure, while the in-house business plan for all sites is currently estimated to create a net profit by 2021/22.

5. Legal Issues

The County Council is obliged to secure best value for the disposal of any sites. Approval of the Secretary of State will be required for any disposal at an undervalue unless the undervalue is less than £2 million and the disposal will help the County Council to secure the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the area. Any disposal of an open space will also require a public notice to be issued for two weeks under Section 123(2A) of the Local Government Act 1972. A review of the land titles has identified no significant issues.

6. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

6.1 There are a number of options available to the County Council and a detailed phase of analysis and continued discussion with external organisations, the Place Scrutiny Committee and key interested parties is required before a final recommendation is reached.

6.2 The Lead Member is recommended to note the progress and the options available for the future management of the eight countryside sites, and approve the approach for assessing options, decision-making and completion of the project as set out in paragraphs 2.7 and 2.8.

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LOCAL MEMBERS:

The table below sets out the County Council Members that have the eight countryside sites considered for transfer to another suitable organisation in their electoral division.

<u>Site</u>	<u>Local Councillor</u>
Camber Sand Dunes/Johnson's Field	Cllr Keith Glazier
Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Jim Sheppard
Ditchling Common Country Park	Cllr Sarah Osborne
Ouse Estuary Nature Reserve	Cllr Darren Grover
Riverside Park	Cllr Sarah Osborne
Seven Sisters Country Park	Cllr Stephen Shing
	Cllr Phil Boorman
Shinewater Park	Cllr Alan Shuttleworth
	Cllr Colin Swansborough
Weir Wood Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Roy Galley

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None