

Submission from South Downs National Park Authority as Preferred Bidder for the Seven Sisters Country Park

Executive Summary

Managing Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) brings with it a heavy responsibility. This is an open space treasured by local people but known worldwide. The very limited visitor study carried out towards the end of the summer of 2019, gave a cross-section of visitors; roughly a third were local people, there for the fresh air, with the remainder made up of a mixture of day and longer-term visitors from across the UK but also North America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

SDNPA's aim is to provide those visitors with a wonderful experience. The landscape does that already, satisfaction rates are extremely high, but we want to take care of the basics so that visitors can get on with enjoying what the countryside has to offer. We will do this by creating a world class visitor centre at Exceat.

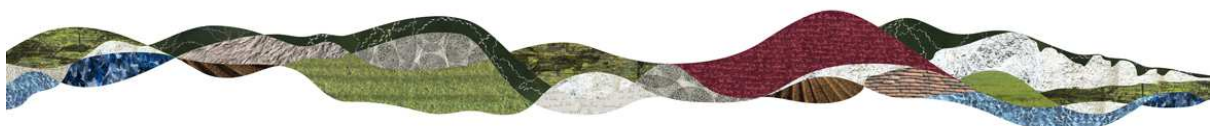
Seven Sisters Country Park is a landscape that is going to be visibly affected by climate change in the relatively short term. This makes it challenging but also valuable for a National Park Authority. SDNPA wants to use the landscape to demonstrate and educate on the effects of climate change but also to study the effects and the best ways of mitigating and managing those effects.

The submission describes the proposal put forward and the commitments made by SDNPA to acquire the country park.

Preparing to take responsibility for the site and preparing for the initial developments is a complex operation and the progress SDNPA has made since being named as preferred bidder is covered for each work stream. SDNPA is working on the detail of the £1.4 million initial investment planned for the first year of ownership, and has teams addressing all of the implications of taking responsibility for the operation of the country park.

The developments proposed for the Country Park are necessarily phased. The first developments will be made within the first year at Exceat and Foxholes and the money for those is already committed.

The second larger phase will follow a funding campaign run by the South Downs National Park Trust and work on that is not likely to begin before 2024. This is much more ambitious and will create a world class visitor centre at Exceat. It is also intended to have facilities there to display the study of climate change in relation to landscape management. The second phase will also involve the refurbishment and bringing back into use New Barn steading as a model farm and climate change study centre for farm management. We will also provide additional accommodation at Foxholes, linked to the study centres.



1) Background

In 2017, when East Sussex County Council first issued a prospectus for a number of countryside sites, SDNPA tasked a Member / Officer working group to look at how the Authority might be involved, particularly with regard to Seven Sisters Country Park, the largest site and wholly within the National Park boundaries.

The Group produced a detailed proposal for SDNPA to acquire SSCP, which was approved by the Authority in May 2019 and agreed as a way forward by ESCC in June 2019.

2) What has SDNPA Committed to do

SDNPA has made a number of commitments in the acquisition proposal of 2018 which led to the award of preferred bidder status. These commitments include:

- To provide capital investment of £1.4 million in the short term, with proposed further investment to follow from various sources, subject to successful funding bids, of £6.6 million over the medium term. The medium term funding ambition has since been upgraded.
- To work in partnership with ESCC on the site, sharing existing contracts and engaging professional services from ESCC where this is possible
- SDNPA would make an offer of a regular payment to ESCC of £35,000 a year, index linked, for 25 years.
- SDNPA will not increase car parking charges at SSCP for a period of three years.
- SDNPA would be prepared to consider an undertaking to ensure that Ditching and Chailey Commons are properly managed in perpetuity through our partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust, although we would not be prepared to take ownership of these sites.

ESCC placed additional conditions on SDNPA during the process. Those involve

- A clawback clause providing ESCC with right of first refusal if any asset within the Country Park is to be sold by SDNPA
- ESCC elected Member representation on the Board of any operating company.

SDNP has agreed to those further conditions, and the clawback clause has been refined to state that no sale of any built asset within the country park will be made without the express agreement of ESCC.

3). What SDNPA Proposed

The SDNPA proposal is based on the proposition that the Authority could make;

A significant and visible improvement in the management of the landscape and habitat



SDNPA drew up an outline habitat management plan for each of the habitats within the Country Park, with the aim of restoring chalk grassland through the removal of scrub, cutting and removing regrowth and grazing. We intend to make the area an exemplar for management of wet meadows and grazing marsh. The improved habitats will bring an increase in wildlife on the site which is encompassed in the Seven Species for Seven Sisters vision.

A significant and visible improvement in the experience of visitors to the country park

The improvements to the habitats described above will be itself an added attraction for visitors to the site, who will be able to enjoy the close habitat as well as the stunning views. This experience will be enhanced by interpretation across the country park, which will also include information on the rich cultural heritage of the site. Accommodation to meet a range of budgets will be provided for visitors at Foxholes. The visitor centre will be upgraded and open for longer hours.

Managing the country park, and effecting the improvements without creating an ongoing draw on the SDNPA revenue budget

The third test was set against a backdrop where ESCC are making at best a small return from the site, and where a small and dedicated team of Rangers at the site are already managing the country park to the best of their ability with the resources they have at their disposal.

The business case therefore depends on a significant injection of capital funds to upgrade the buildings and bring them back into commercial use. A risk register was developed at this time and a summary is included as Appendix 1.

4). How SDNPA will fund the improvements

Short Term Funding

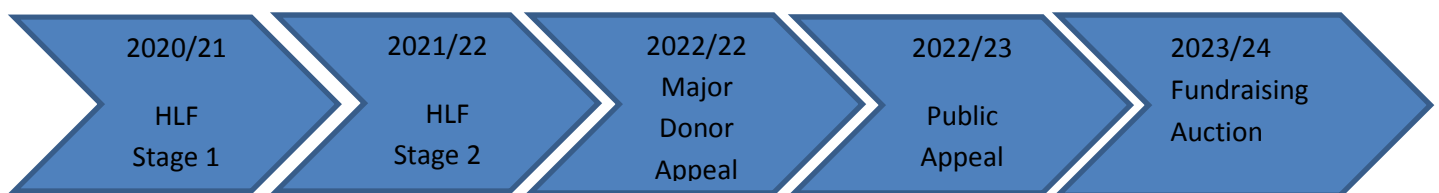
Arrangements are being put in place for SDNPA to borrow £1.4million in 2020/21 and this will be contained in the capital budget for that year. This will fund the initial Phase 1 refurbishment works within the Country Park. It is estimated that the trading company will require a working capital investment of about £200,000 when it is established in April 2020 and funding will be provided for this from current SDNPA reserves as a loan.

The business plan for SSCP under SDNPA ownership includes development of retail within the visitor centre. As well as adding to the visitor experience, the income from this (up to £1.50 per visitor in similar visitor centres run by other National Parks in the UK) will help to offset the costs of running the centre. SDNPA will also provide accommodation within the Country Park, at Foxholes. This, with the existing parking and rentals on the site, will provide, from year 4/5 onwards, a surplus projected as £150,000 per year, allowing SDNPA to invest in the landscape and also to service any future borrowing of capital funds



A strategy for funding the second phase of work at Seven Sisters Country Park is already underway and SDNPA have submitted an expression of interest to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, aiming to submit a bid for an £8 million grant towards a £13 million project within SSCP. This builds on SDNPA's initial commitment to seek additional investment in the medium term, and would allow SDNPA to fulfil all of their ambitions for the country park in a single phase. The grant, whether this one or another, when awarded will form the foundation for a funding campaign which will the South Downs National Park Trust has agreed to launch. This will be supported by further borrowing by SDNPA to provide the balance necessary. Should the grant funding come in smaller packages, then SDNPA would look to complete the work in more than one phase.

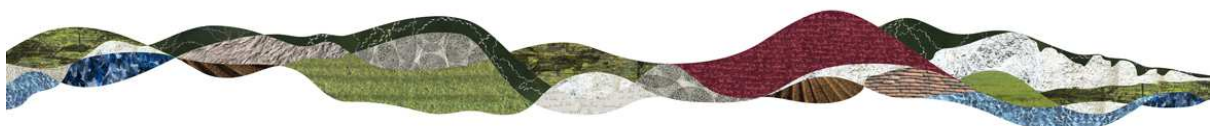
The timeline for the funding of phase 2 is as follows;



5). Ambitions for SSCP and phasing of improvements

SDNPA's ambitions for SSCP is for it to become "an outstanding place for nature and people where we work with the landscape and communities to demonstrate how to adapt to climate change."

Phase	Timeline	Outcome
One	May '20 to May '21	Exceat Visitor Centre refurbished with new interpretation and signage, extended toilet facilities and food outlets, craft workshops and children's woodland play area.
		Foxhole cottages and camping barn refurbished, public camping established.
Two	May '21 to May '25	Habitat improvements on-site, public transport offering improved, Country Park integration, fundraising and major donor campaign underway
Three	May '25 onwards	Further construction work at Exceat to complete world class visitor and climate change(landscape management) study centre. This will include a southern entrance under the main road, linking the visitor centre to the main country park.
		Construction work at New Barn to restore model farm steading with climate change (farming practices) study centre



6). What SDNPA will do in the first year of ownership

- **For visitors**

Finding out about Seven Sisters Country Park

We will create an online gateway to Seven Sisters Country Park that will enable visitors to plan their visit and learn about the Country Park before they travel. Park Rangers will update information on what is happening in the Country Park and what visitors can do and see at different times of year.

Arriving at Seven Sisters Country Park

Visitors will be encouraged to use public transport where possible and SDNPA will work with the bus companies to ensure this an easy and cost-effective experience. There will be clear signage directing visitors to the Country Park.

The Visitor Centre

The visitor centre will be upgraded to provide engaging interpretation for visitors, and it will be staffed 364 days a year to provide information and advice. The visitor centre will include a range of sustainably sourced goods, including those produced by local crafts people. Staff and volunteers will be on hand to provide information and advice on the country park and the surrounding area.

Visitors will have a choice of a range of locally sourced food, in what will be a plastic free environment. There will be new and extended toilet facilities on site, specified to cope with peak demand, and there will be new facilities for visitors, including a woodland play area for children.

Around the Park

Longer-term plans include the use of subtle or invisible interpretation across the Country Park to enable visitors to get the most from their visit. There is a clear aim to provide an integrated experience for visitors, between the visitor centre and the main part of the country park and between the different organisations who operate there. Everybody who works or trades in the Country Park will be expected to be identified with the Country Park and to be an ambassador for it.

Accommodation

Visitors will be able to extend their stay within the country park by taking advantage of a range of accommodation all situated around Foxholes. We will in the early part of the project, clear the existing pond and restore the pastoral landscape. Public camping will be available in front of the camping barn at low cost. The camping barn itself will be turned into a bunkhouse, with sleeping and cooking facilities for individuals and family groups. There will be a warden within the site. The



three cottages will be holiday lets and will be specified to provide four-star accommodation. A high degree of sustainability will be built in, with the cottages being essentially off-grid, and with outdoor space behind each one to encourage holidaymakers to get outdoors. This will also be reflected in the operation, with Foxholes being run as a car free zone; visitors will leave their cars at Exceat and be transported on their arrival and departure and walking or cycling between times.

Accessibility

Experiencing nature and open spaces is a vital component of physical and mental welfare and it is important that we do everything we can to break down real and perceived barriers to allow as many people as possible to benefit from nature's assets. Seven Sisters is already one of the more accessible countryside sites on the south coast, well served by public transport and with a level concrete path into the Country Park. SDNPA will add to this, with a fully accessible visitor centre and including 'changing places' toilet facilities, and staff on-hand to assist and guide visitors to the Country Park. Our Rangers will carry out work to open up more of the site to people of mixed abilities and will run guided tours within the Country Park.

We want to encourage local communities to visit the country park and take part in activities within the park, whether that is simply walking or whether it involves getting on a bike or going out in the water. SDNPA will actively market the facilities to local communities by going into schools and to adult groups and bringing people into the Country Park to do the things that interest them. One of the two primary purposes of a National Park Authority is to increase knowledge and understanding of the environment and SSCP represents an ideal gateway to get local people involved.

- **On land management**

Located within the Eastern Downs, the Country Park includes 280ha of land almost entirely of which is SSSI with a diverse range of habitats including chalk grassland, floodplain grazing marsh and a range of other wetland and intertidal habitats, as well as key geological geomorphological features. The site also has significant cultural heritage features from archaeological sites and monuments of Stone Age and Bronze Age to the defence of Britain in the Second World War. It is a recreational space with a mix of open access, permissive access and rights of way including the National Trail: The South Downs Way. It is also a farmed landscape.

SDNPA have started to build an evidence base to inform future land management and are currently commissioning a number of studies (both internal and external) that will allow a detailed management plan to be developed for the site. Once that is completed, work will begin to enhance those habitats. SDNPA see the Country Park as an important centre for the monitoring, management and mitigation of climate change and many of the measures will be built around this, which will also form part of the visitor experience.



Chalk Grassland Management and Restoration

An aspiration for the remaining chalk grassland areas would be to bring them into excellent condition by reversing the invasion of Tor Grass and implementing a targeting grazing regime on those areas to create authentic chalk grassland.



The SDNPA continues to be an active member of the Cuckmere Estuary Group – involving key agencies, landowners as well as local community representation. In managing the Country Park we would work closely with local partners (including Sussex Heritage Coast Partnership, Friends of the Cuckmere and the Cuckmere and Pevensey WLMB) and develop an adaptive approach to management so as to maintain it as a haven for people and wildlife.

The Cuckmere Estuary is part of a dynamic coastline and wider River Cuckmere Catchment which is already being influenced by climate change now and which will continue into the future. This could see a rise in sea levels and also more intense rain events which may result in both coastal and fluvial flooding, but also periods of drought.

SDNPA's approach therefore will be to manage the landscape in a way that enables it to absorb the effects of climate change in a manner that enhances rather than depletes wildlife habitats and natural diversity.

7). Progress SDNPA has made since June 2019 to date (November 2019)

Project Governance

SDNPA have appointed a Project Board to oversee the SSCP transition, comprising a number of Members, the Senior Management Team and a representative from the South Downs National Park Trust (SDNPT). A Project Manager has been appointed to lead a team in several work streams and a Project Delivery Plan covering the project to phase one completion has been approved. The project governance is following the Prince II project management methodology.



Five main work streams have been established within the project team to take forward the necessary work;

a). Infrastructure / Development

This work stream is responsible for delivering the work covered by the initial investment of £1.4million of SDNPA funding within the Country Park. This has been initially allocated as follows for phase 1 ;

Location	Outcome	Estimated Cost
<u>Exceat</u>		
Visitor Centre	Refurbishment and interpretation	£70,000
Workshops & Dairy Barn	Provision of new public toilets and craft workshops	£235,000
Existing toilet block	Provision of 'Grab & Go' food outlet	£150,000
Woodland Area	Children's Woodland Play Area	£80,000
<u>Foxholes</u>		
Cottages (3)	Refurbishment to provide holiday accom.	£450,000
Camping Barn	Conversion to bunkhouse	£50,000
	Contingency and possible stabilisation at New Barn	£300,000

The ambition to have this work completed and ready for the beginning of the summer season in 2021 means that this work stream is already time critical. Therefore SDNPA has already allocated £50k of funds and commissioned a number of surveys. The main Architect for phase 1 has been appointed and whilst it is too early in the process to share the outcomes of this work, we are expecting the initial drawings by early February

Our ICT supplier has obtained indicative quotations to bring fibre broadband to Exceat and we are currently looking at options to extend this to Foxholes, the Canoe Barn, and eventually New Barn.



b). Visitor Experience

A visitor study has been conducted within the Country Park in late summer to gain the views of a range of different types of visitors to the site. A summary of the results is included as Appendix 2. A contractor is now in place to develop the visitor signage and interpretation works, both at Exceat and in the wider landscape.

Plans are underway to develop a separate micro-site on the web for SSCP and to begin talks with public transport providers to promote the Country Park on their vehicles.

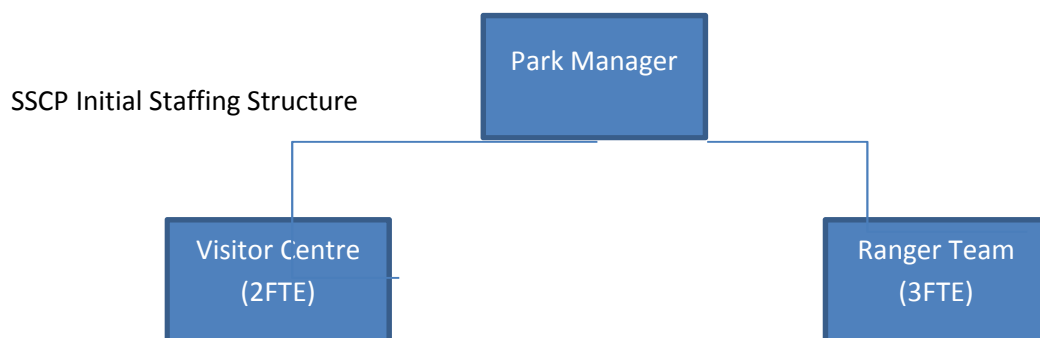
c). Landscape

Within this work stream, SDNPA have worked with ESCC to complete the open access arrangements for the country park and we are beginning talks with the tenant farmer on the site about an extension to the farm tenancy while the wider landscape strategy is developed. Consultants are being commissioned to provide additional capacity to the SDNPA team to develop the landscape strategy for the site.

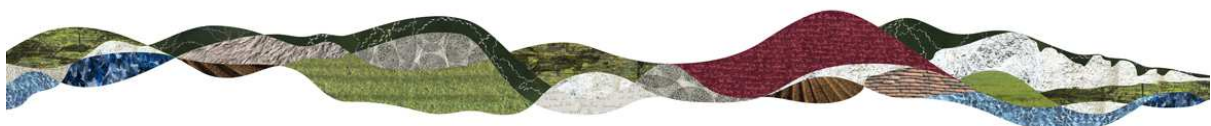
d). Human Resources

SDNPA have a staffing structure in place for the opening of the Country Park and have job descriptions and a recruitment strategy in place.

ESCC staff subject to TUPE transfer to SDNPA have a place within the staffing structure. All staff transferred will be employed by SDNPA and be seconded to the trading company. All terms and conditions, including pension rights, will be protected under the transfer.



The Park Manager will be responsible primarily for all aspects of the visitor experience within the country park. It is expected that while different staff will have their own specialisms and specific duties, they will work flexibly and be prepared to plug gaps in the delivery whenever those appear.



The role of volunteers in the Country Park is crucial to the visitor experience and SDNPA will be providing a full welcome and induction package for all existing volunteers on the site and will aim to recruit additional volunteers from the surrounding settlements. A number of different volunteer roles have already been identified, including within the visitor centre, more general greeting and guiding of visitors and working on the landscape.

e). Legal and Governance

There are several issues with the transfer that may affect VAT and Land Tax that are being resolved with assistance from our tax advisors. The main remaining issue is around the transfer and immediate lease back of the canoe barn and we are expecting to require a note of assurance from HMRC on the position regarding this.

A trading company is being established to manage the commercial operations within Seven Sisters Country Park. This is proposed to be a company limited by shareholding and will be wholly owned by SDNPA. The company will be responsible operationally to a new Seven Sisters Country Park Board, through a detailed Service Level Agreement. The membership of the Board will include a number of SDNPA members and a representative from East Sussex County Council.

Other Discussions

Buzz Active – SDNPA and ESCC have had initial discussions regarding the Buzz Active operations at the Canoe Barn in particular but also the other locations they are operating from. We see the work that Buzz Active do at Seven Sisters as being integral to the Country Park and wish to support the operation as much as we can. We plan further discussions on the following options;

- A joint enterprise adjacent to the riverside car park
- Integrated visitor packages with accommodation
- Provision of high-speed broadband from the Exceat steading
- Assistance and involvement in any future business model

Granary Barn – SDNPA also see cycle hire as being integral to the visitor offer to the Country Park and we are committed to seeing a business providing this from the Granary Barn. If this does not happen within the existing tenancy we will seek to recover the leasehold and support a business to run cycle hire from the site. Discussions are scheduled with the receiver and the receiver's solicitor to progress this.

Chailey and Ditchling Commons – The Chief Executive of SDNPA is in monthly meetings with Sussex Wildlife Trust, which oversees progress on these sites. SDNPA stands ready to support and facilitate the transfer of responsibility for managing those sites as required.



8). What SDNPA plan to do in the longer term

Exceat Steading

A major capital investment will allow the steading to be refurbished and added to, without losing the essential character of the buildings but by providing more usable space, to hold a world class visitor centre, with a southern entrance directly into the Country Park, underneath the road. Adjacent to the visitor centre there will be a Centre for Climate Change Study. This will hold education and research facilities into the impact of climate change on the landscape of the country park and the heritage coast as well as the effectiveness of mitigation in landscape management.

New Barn Steading

Major capital investment will again allow the steading to be completely refurbished to provide a model farm, with the necessary barns and pens, but also with a further climate change study centre, in this case featuring the impacts on farming and examining the effectiveness (trialled on the site) of mitigation methodologies.



Appendix 1 Risk Register

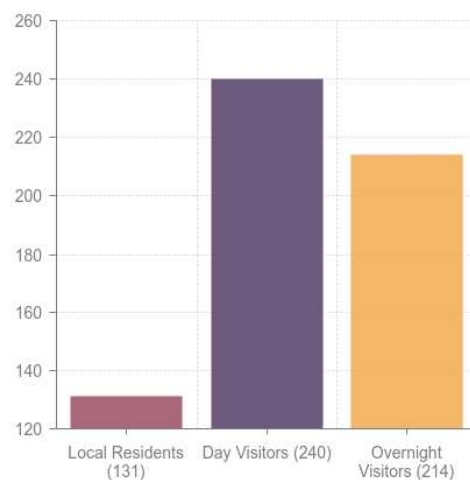
Details of Risk			Inherent Risk				Residual risk		
Risk Number	original date	Risk Description	Probability	Impact	Rating	Mitigations	Probability	Impact	Rating
I		Delays to upgrading work within the Country Park affect cash flow and have an adverse impact on SDNPA reputation	3	3	9	Realistic programme of works formulated at outset. Sufficient time for design, commissioning and works to be allowed. Traditional contracting process aimed at risk reduction. Active contract management to ensure delivery is achieved.	2	3	6
		Cost overrun on upgrading work impacts on capital investment required and ROI.	3	3	9	Robust estimates provided by specialist consultants before work commences. Sharing of risk and reward with contractors. Active cost control during contract with value engineering if necessary. Adequate contingency allowed.	2	2	4
		Reduction in visitor numbers due to economic factors; strong pound, weak global economy, increased travel costs, change in visitor preferences.	3	3	9	Increased marketing of site to offset reductions, monitor visitor satisfaction to ensure site facilities are meeting needs, keep attractions fresh and relevant to visitors.	2	3	6
		Increase in visitor numbers causes congestion on site, reducing attractiveness of experience and has negative impact on surrounding area and infrastructure.	4	4	16	SDNPA would not want to be ever discouraging visitors to the National Park. However, options to encourage visitors to SSCP to visit other attractions within NP, provide information on when quiet times are to visit, introduce offers on public transport / provide transport from nearby train stations to reduce visitor impact, increase capacity and improve visitor management within SSCP.	3	2	5
		SDNPA fail to negotiate removal of restriction from Saltmarsh lease to allow catering on site.	3	4	12	SDNPA can put forward package that is attractive to Saltmarsh café and will benefit both parties. Option to allow leasee to operate catering within VC at commercial rates.	2	4	8



SSCP Visitor Survey Results

585 people interviewed in July, August and September 2019 across 4 locations in SSCP

Visitor Breakdown



89%

had no mental or physical health problem/disability which lasted longer than 12 months

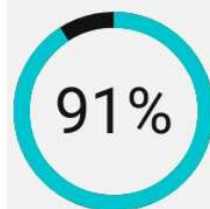
90% of visitors were aware they were in a National Park (97% local resident)



65% travelled by private motor vehicle (local residents mostly to use private vehicle)



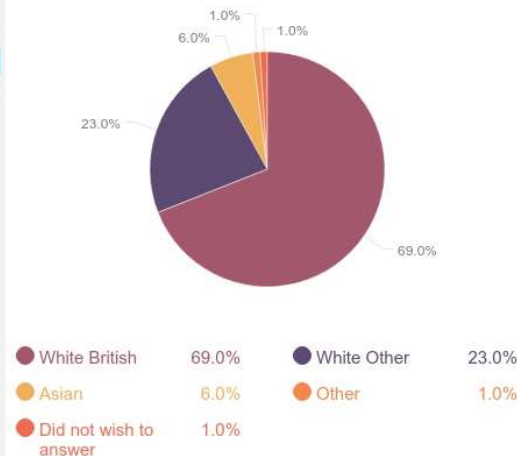
25% travelled by public bus service (overnight visitors most likely to travel by bus)



of all visitors were in adult only groups.

10% of visitors were under 16yrs

Ethnicity



Of the Asian visitors 10% were day visitors and 4% were overnight visitors

Planned on-site activities



Overnight visitors nearly 4 times more likely to visit the cafe and 5 times more likely to go to the visitor centre than a local resident

96%

Overnight visitors of the overnight visitors were from the UK, 4% were overseas. The majority of these visitors were staying in Eastbourne, Brighton and Alfriston