

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 26 April 2016

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Countryside Access Strategy

Purpose: To consider the development of the draft strategy and the implementation plan for how it will be achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Cabinet is recommended to:

- (1) note the draft strategy and agree that it is publicly consulted on for a 12 week period ;
and
 - (2) agree to increase the car parking charges as set out in Appendix 5
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1. Background Information

1.1. In March 2014, the Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee endorsed the development of a commissioning strategy for public rights of way (PRoW) and countryside site (CS) management. At the Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 18 March 2015, a Scrutiny Review Board was created to assist in the development of the draft commissioning strategy. It has met on four occasions, working alongside the commissioning strategy Project Team on the development of the draft strategy.

1.2. The draft strategy sets out how the County Council proposes to secure the best outcomes for East Sussex residents, discharging its statutory responsibilities and maximising the contribution that PRoW and CS can make to Council priorities. This report gives a brief summary of the development of the draft strategy, and the proposed implementation process.

2. Supporting Information

A commissioning approach

2.1 In developing the draft strategy (set out in Appendix 1) a commissioning approach has been adopted. Central to the 'needs assessment' (the first stage in the commissioning cycle) is the County Council's statutory obligations. As Highway Authority, the County Council has a statutory duty under the Highways Act to ensure that the 2,000 mile PRoW network is accessible and maintained. It also has a duty as landowner to conserve the wildlife value of 10 countryside sites (including Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves) totalling 1,160 hectares (see Appendix 2) and to ensure safe public access to these sites.

2.2 In addition to considering the County Council's statutory responsibilities, the engagement activity sought to establish what contribution PRoW and CS make to the Council's priorities. Survey responses, together with stakeholder events, have shown that PRoW and CS are used for fresh air, health benefits and to enjoy scenery and walking. National research has also documented the health benefits of exercise and in particular green exercise (i.e. outdoors in green areas).

2.3 The maintenance of PRoW and conservation work at CS generates a significant amount of community involvement and there are numerous examples of community groups forming to support such activities. This contributes to community cohesion and results in communities taking pride and ownership in their local area and green spaces which supports our priority of helping people to help themselves.

2.4 It is difficult to quantify the contribution that PRoW and CS make to the economy. Tourism is valued at £1.35bn in East Sussex, and accounts for 22,483 jobs. Whilst not easily measured, it is estimated that the countryside accounts for roughly 10% of tourist related business, i.e. £134m and 2,250 jobs. However the link between this and the PRoW network and CS is difficult to assess.

2.5 Intelligence gained from our research and engagement work has led us to define four strategic outcomes in the draft strategy:

- Enable residents and visitors to safely use our public rights of way and countryside sites;
- Support and enable landowners, stakeholders and residents to exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities;
- Achieve the most efficient and effective management of our public rights of way and countryside sites for the benefit of residents, visitors and wildlife;
- Enhance local communities through engagement with our public rights of way and countryside sites.

2.6 The first two outcomes reflect the need to discharge our statutory responsibilities and the third and fourth recognise the contribution that appropriate management of our assets can make to the Council's priorities. The vision and strategic outcomes are shown with more detail on pages 9 and 10 of the strategy.

2.7 Continuing with a commissioning approach, the review then considered the range of options for management of these assets to ensure that we make the best use of our resources. A range of models were explored including use of contractors, management by charitable organisations, creation of a trading company or social enterprise, transfer or sale of land, in-house provision and partnership arrangements. Each was considered against cost, risk and interest criteria as well as how well they could deliver the strategic outcomes (benefit). See Appendices 3 and 4.

2.8 The draft strategy recommends a differentiated approach and considers PRoW separately to CS concluding:

- PRoW are recommended to be managed in-house, this covers areas such as maintenance, enforcement and legal record keeping. A number of areas of improvement are identified including how we prioritise Public Health objectives, work with those developing new paths and the contribution of our volunteer offer.
- The management of CS is recommended to change. It is proposed that, by changing how the sites are managed, there may be an improvement to both the visitor experience and conservation work. By seeking to pass the sites to other organisations experienced in community involvement, conservation and visitor engagement, it is anticipated that there will be improvements in what the sites have to offer. The Cuckoo Trail and Forest Way are more like Public Rights of Way in their appearance and use, so they require different management arrangements to green open space. Consequently, it is proposed that the Cuckoo Trail and Forest Way continue to be managed in-house.

2.9 In tandem with the development of this approach, the Council should seek to maximise the income generated to support the Council's duties in relation to PRoW and CS; in particular, by reviewing parking charges. As part of preparation of the draft strategy, we have identified that the parking charges at Seven Sisters Country Park ('SSCP') have not been increased since 2009. It is therefore proposed to increase the tariffs by the equivalent of CPI (Consumer Price Index) inflation, which rose by 16.9% between 2009 and 2014. The proposed increase will raise approximately £23,000 additional income. This extra income will contribute towards meeting wider savings targets and offsetting the inflationary increase in site management costs since 2009. The details of the proposed increase in parking tariffs are shown in Appendix 5.

Market development and implementation

2.10 The implementation of the strategy, particularly the aspects relating to CS, is likely to have a lengthy timeframe reflecting the complexities associated with land deals and the range of stakeholders likely to be involved. The draft implementation plan is shown in Appendix 6. Each site can be considered separately or as part of a package. The choice of recipient and governance model will be determined on a site by site basis reflective of such considerations as the statutory environmental designation. Initial engagement with interested parties will commence at the end of April 2016 and information gathered through this process will, along with the consultation responses, be used to inform the final strategy.

2.11 A targeted marketing campaign will only commence once the final strategy has been approved. Only organisations appropriate to each site will be invited to bid and bids will be assessed against a matrix model to understand relative benefits of each. The sites will not be passed to organisations if this is not found financially viable for the County Council.

Scrutiny Review Board comments and recommendations

2.12 A Review Board of the Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee has worked alongside the commissioning strategy Project Team to provide elected Member input into the development of the draft Countryside Access Commissioning Strategy. The comments and recommendations of the Review Board on the development of the draft strategy are contained in the report of the Review Board in Appendix 7. The Review Board supports the development of the draft strategy and endorses the differentiated approach to commissioning services for PRoW and countryside sites outlined in paragraph 2.8 above.

3. Conclusions and Reasons for Recommendations

3.1. The draft strategy sets out how the County Council proposes to meet its statutory obligations in respect of PRoW and CS while maximising the contribution that they can make to the Council's stated priorities. It is based on a solid evidence base developed from a thorough engagement process, as well as specialist research and internal review. Cabinet is recommended to note the draft strategy and to approve that it is publicly consulted on for a 12 week period.

3.2. The parking tariffs at SSCP have not been increased since 2009. Cabinet is recommended to approve the increase in parking charges as set out in Appendix 5.

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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 (40)
Chailey Common Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Jim Sheppard (8)
Cuckoo Trail	Cllr Laurence Keeley (Hailsham) (21)

	Cllr Bill Bentley (Hailsham) (21)
	Cllr Mike Blanch (Hampden Park) (11)
	Cllr Rupert Simmons (Heathfield) (30)
	Cllrs Daniel and Stephen Shing (Polegate) (37)
	Cllr Chris Dowling (Horam) (20)
	Cllr Nick Bennett (Hellingly) (1)
Ditchling Common Country Park	Cllr Jim Sheppard (8)
Forest Way Country Park	Cllr Francis Whetstone (18)
Ouse Estuary Nature Reserve	Cllr Peter Charlton (34)
Riverside Park	Cllr Carla Butler (32)
Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP)	Cllrs Daniel and Stephen Shing (37)
Shinewater Park	Cllr Alan Shuttleworth (Langney) (12)
	Cllr Mike Blanch (Hampden Park) (11)
Weir Wood Local Nature Reserve	Cllr Francis Whetstone (18)

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- Technical appendices of the draft Countryside Access Strategy.
- EqlA of the draft Countryside Access Strategy.