

Report to	Policy & Resources Committee
Date	18 September 2025
By	Commercial & Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters
Title of Report	Q1 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26

Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

I. Receive and consider Q1 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the P&R Committee on the performance of the Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) during Quarter 1 (Q1) of 2025/26, 1 April – 30 June 2025.
- 1.2 This report contains an update on performance against the SSCP Operating Plan 2025/26 which was approved by the Authority in March 2025.
- 1.3 A summary of KPIs can be viewed in Appendix 1.

2. Update on performance against KPIs

- 2.1 Q1 has witnessed a growth in visitor numbers, also exacerbated by the continued good weather. The site has been very busy which has created some staffing and physical capacity challenges – especially at weekends along with conflicts of priorities between nature and visitor experience.
- 2.2 Staffing capacity was impacted in Q1 following the resignation of the Visitor Services Manager in May, alongside the long-term absence of another member of staff. Recruitment for the Visitor Services Manager is underway with the aim to appoint in Q2.
- 2.3 The Senior Park Ranger's one-year temporary contract, has been extended for a further 3 years, funded by the Countryside Stewardship Agreement to enable the delivery of the agreement.
- 2.4 The following report summarises performance in Q1 in accordance with the agreed SSCP Operating Plan. Whilst two areas are reporting amber at the end of Q2, by yearend they are expected to be achieved. The two red reporting at this stage are due to prioritised workloads due to staffing capacity and will be addressed in Q3/4.

3. Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery

- 3.1 Highlights of work undertaken in Q1 to both deliver the Countryside Stewardship and manage the landscape include:
- Spring / summer grazing plans, allowing for sheep and cows to leave and return after lambing / calving and for the ponies to rotate on site.
 - Roping off vegetated shingle to enable habitats to flourish in an area with high footfall.
 - Actively managing water levels in the lagoons with high tides via the sluice gate.
 - Commencing butterfly transect and chalk grassland surveying to build on monitoring our success in managing the landscape for nature recovery.
 - Dew pond maintenance works with new planting now ponds are establishing
 - Installation of new (and replacing old) benches at Rams Field and Foxhole Dew Pond
 - Installation of new park entrance gate off A259 and continued upgrading of gates along the South Downs Way (in partnership with the Access funding)
 - Tree popping and creeping thistle cutting and collection
 - Responding to significant occasions of graffiti and mass litter clearance incidents
 - Ongoing grass cutting and general presentation maintenance in high visitor footfall areas.
 - Media interview on ITV News to promote the photo posts as a citizen science opportunity. Photos have been regularly submitted from all three photo posts and are being collated as an evidence base.
 - 4 x Corporate Volunteering occasions working in the landscape with American Express, Environment Agency and Wolf and Badger.
 - 13 x other volunteering sessions including 10 South Down Volunteers sessions and 3 Youth Action Days
 - Working alongside Claire Kerr in the preparatory discussions for the launch of the Seven Sisters Super National Nature Reserve.
 - Refocussed social media postings to highlight landscape views, nature and infrastructure improvements instead of chalk cliff imagery (unless safety messages) as part of a soft launch to change perceptions and behaviours away from a municipal park to a nature reserve. Initial engagement seems positive.
 - Launched new 'dogs on lead' signage at park entrance and all gates off the main track, building on the Take the lead campaign

4. First Class Visitor Destination & Seasonal Planning

Long Term Ambition

- Initial 'Sense of Place' workshop (developing visitor interpretation, new audiences and programming with the stories of the country park) held with the SSCP team highlighting themes that could inform engagement activities during the year.
- Wider sense of place activities with other SDNPA colleagues will take place during off season to inform the development of future project funding.
- Active engagement with Heritage Coast partners, especially Birling Gap (NT) to share travel and safety information at weekends and peak periods on social media.

- SSCP Travel Plan drafted, with an evolving review after the peak season to then engage with key stakeholders.
- Agreement with Forestry England to work in partnership to install an off road, waymarked route between the Friston Forest and SSCP on their land, to encourage visitors off the busy Litlington Road. Designs are in production with an aim of installation in Q2.
- Following discussions between the Authority and the South Downs National Park Trust, the Trust has agreed to adopt the decommissioned telephone box at SSCP from BT. The SDNPA is not able to adopt the telephone box itself as the Authority does not fall within BT's criteria of bodies whom they permit to adopt a telephone box. A lease agreement is to be entered into for the Authority to assume all liabilities for the telephone box to support the work at SSCP. The Comms team are working on visitor interpretation to be located inside the phone box with capital funding, but these cannot be delivered until the agreement is signed and the phone box adopted.

5. Operational Delivery:

- The Visitor Centre manually recorded 21,366 visitors in Q1 (4% increase on previous year), with an average spend of £9.44, slightly lower than the £9.50 target. Visitor spending trends are observed to be on smaller souvenir items which will contribute to the amber KPI reporting. With seasonal spending trends, at this stage we are confident of this reporting as green by year end.
- New stock lines have been added to the range available, and we continue to source local / within national park suppliers as much as we can alongside more mainstream lines. At the end of Q1 income was reporting marginally higher than budget due to the visitor uplift.
- The Grab & Go recorded a spend per head of £5.53, slightly above target. At the end of Q1 income was reporting marginally higher than budget due to the visitor uplift.
- The ice cream tender process was completed and awarded to Southern Countries Crawley, who will arrive on site in Q2. The previous trailer, with several health & safety concerns was removed from site and sold for scrap as part of a wider onsite clearance plan.
- The annual Visit England Visitor Attractions Assessment was undertaken at the end of Q1, and a score of 81% was achieved (which is an increase on the 2024 score of 75%) recognising the ongoing improvements at SSCP.
- In house, external and private hire events programme continued to evolve in Q1 providing outreach and engagement opportunities alongside income generation. Income is currently performing well as a result, but Members should be mindful that Q1 and Q2 are the main income periods for event income.
- 21 private hire events took place including free SDNPA and partner 'opportunity cost' events, an art exhibition, art workshops and key events with partners National Parks Partnership, Friends of South Downs and the South Downs Trust.
- 6 in house events included a 'Women's Land Army in Sussex' local history talk, two school holiday trails and two Bird themed events with Micheal Blencowe and Sussex Wildlife Trust.
- Q1 was the first marketed season for the Cuckmere Cottages by the concession manager. The cottages continued to perform well, with occupancy reported as Kestrel 53%, Skylark 37% and Redshank 37%. This is considered positive for the industry. Notable trends are for weekend and shorter, last minute midweek bookings from both UK and overseas audiences. The 2 persons cottage is more popular than the larger

cottages, which are less likely to be last minute bookings as larger groups often require more planning. Guest books are full of positive reviews in each cottage. Anecdotal observations include several repeat visits from people that have stayed as a couple as they had memories of SSCP in childhood – eg family holidays, school trips – who were keen then to return with their families to share the experience.

- The Camping Barn achieved 58% occupancy during Q1. Bookings continue from the likes of Duke of Edinburgh, scout and school groups but an increase in independent groups and family bookings has been noted. Groups such as The Garden Classroom, supported by SDNPA and South Downs National Park Trust are booked for repeat visits.
- Two visitor experience volunteers continued to provide weekly litter picks estimated to be 72.25 hours in Q1. A reduction in staff capacity in Q1, has paused the active recruitment of additional visitor experience volunteers.
- 69 mobility hire bookings were supported in Q1, and as mentioned in previous reports a number of regular, repeat visitors are appreciative of the opportunity to engage with the landscape using the two scooters.
- Social media channels (Instagram and Facebook) have been regularly updated with strong imagery of nature and the landscape and to promote events. It is noted that the commercial / events posts do not receive the same levels of engagement as nature images. However, utilising the Facebook events platform has proved to be a free, and effective platform to promote events to more local audiences.

6. Financial Stability:

Asset Management

- Works at New Barn cottage commenced to carry out essential structural works and to refurbish the accommodation for a tenant. Works are due to be completed end of Q2/ start Q3 within budget and the expected timeframe with a view to sourcing a tenant and income from Q3.
- Enhancement works were completed in the south car park during April, adding lined spaces, pedestrian walkways, marked bay for the ice cream concession and formal disabled parking bays. A pay & display machine was relocated to a more user-friendly location and an opening 3m height barrier was installed at the entrance to enable the management of coach traffic at busy times. These works have improved the visitor experience in the car park whilst also improving safety and efficiency.

Financial Stability

- As reported in the main budget papers, at the end of Q1 SSCP is reporting a £30k favourable variance – mainly due to elevated trading from increased visitor numbers.
- New car park tariffs and bands were launched on 1 April. Tariffs are now available for up to 2hrs, up to 4hrs and over 4hrs. A full analysis of the impact of the change in tariffs will be completed at the end of Q2 but during Q1 the combination of increased tariffs and visitors has seen an uplift in car park income against budget.
- Monthly car park compliance is disappointingly reporting as amber, below target during Q1. Observations included non-payment of coaches and blue badge holders during the monthly checks alongside general non-compliance. The presence of weekend car park attendants during Q2 has helped to reinforce the message that the car park is pay & display but overall trends are being monitored.

- There were only 5 Sussex Film Office photo shoot / filming occasions in the park during Q1. Feedback confirms that it had been a quiet period for the industry in general.
- The coin donation plinth install in the visitor centre last quarter has been popular with visitors, who have engaged with the coin drop in greater numbers than the previous unit. Also noted has been an increase in the suggested £5 donation for the use of the mobility scooters with a more obvious receptacle in situ.
- SSCP were pleased to host the first SDT legacy event, where visitors interested in leaving a legacy to the Trust were provided with an introduction to SDT, local wine and a Ranger tour so they could see the positive impact of future legacies.

7. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No further decisions are required as a direct result of this report.
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	There are no direct resource implications to this report, as the recommendations are to receive and consider only.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	It is important that Members consider the performance of the SSCP against the KPIs to ensure the Authority's assets are being effectively managed.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	SSCP supports delivery of the majority of outcomes in the PMP and is a key area of work in the Corporate Plan contributing to the higher-level targets.
Links to other projects or partner organisations	To note that SSCP is now an inhouse operation.
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	The Authority's climate change ambition at SSCP is to lead by example through how it's working practices and how it operates at and manages SSCP.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	None
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	With SSCP being a site attracting a large number of visitors significant works have been undertaken on site to ensure equality of opportunity as far as possible for visitors.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None

Implication	Yes*/No
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	None
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	Whilst there are many H&S considerations at SSCP, there are no implications directly arising from this performance report.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	None

8. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

- 8.1 There are no direct risks associated with this performance report. Risks to the SDNPA are monitored on their various risk registers, including on the Corporate Risk Register which is overseen by the P&R Committee.

CLAIRE ONSLOW

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 Appendices: Appendix I – SSCP KPI's Q1
 External Consultees: None
 Background Documents: None

Objective	KPI	Reporting mechanism	Annual Measure	Reporting	Q1 Due 01/08/25	Q1 commentary. Please share insights and commentary from the last quarter. This is used in the performance reports.	Q2	Q3	Q4	
Exemplar Land Management & Nature Recovery	No. Corporate Volunteer Activities	NP4ALL log	12	Quarterly	4					Please ensure a figure for this quarter, if applicable, has been entered on the logs
	No. of volunteer activities	NP4ALL log	50	Quarterly	13	10 x SDV sessions and 3 x Youth Action Days				
	Hectares of habitat created, improved or secured for nature recovery	Nature Recovery Log	SSCP contribution to overall SDNPA1,300ha target	Quarterly		to follow				
Objective	KPI		Measure	Reported						
First Class Visitor Destination Visitor Engagement & Seasonal Planning	Average Spend per Transaction in Visitor Centre (ASTV)	SSCP systems	Over £9.50	Quarterly	£9.44	net figure. inc vat £11.14				
	Average Spend per Transaction in Food & Beverage (ASTV)	SSCP systems	Over £5.25	Quarterly	£5.53	net figure. inc vat £8.40				
	Annual Visit England Visitor Attraction Assessment	SSCP systems	Over 75%	Annual	81%	survey conducted in June 2025			81%	
	No. private hire events	SSCP systems	75	Quarterly	21	inc. SDNPA hire and foc partnership hires. Art exhibitions, NPP, SDT,				
	No. In house events	SSCP systems	20	Quarterly	6	Womans Land Army & Shepherds of SD talks, 2 x school holiday free trails, Bird talk walk,				
	Volunteering	SSCP data	100	Quarterly	72.25	2 x volunteers weekly litter pick				
	No. mobility scooter hires	SSCP data	100	Quarterly	69					
	Cottages Occupancy Rate	SSCP data	55%	Quarterly	42.49%	Kestrel 53%, Skylark 37%, Redshank 37% (Camping occupancy 58% not included in that 42% figure)				
	Car park compliance checks	SSCP data	Over 90%	Quarterly	84%	lack of compliance noted for Blue badges and coaches				
	SSCP Miles without Stiles page views	SSCP website data	5000 per year	Quarterly	595	Accessibility page where this link sits received 1114 hits)				
SSCP Educational page views	SSCP website data	5000 per year	Quarterly	164	No developments to education pages in Qu 1					
	Visitor survey 2026/27 - align with SDNPA visitor survey									

