

Report to **Policy & Resources Committee**  
Date **20 November 2025**  
By **Commercial & Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters**  
Title of Report **Q2 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26**

**Note**

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**Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:**

**I. Receive and consider Q2 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26**

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**I. Introduction**

- I.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 2 (Q2) of 2025/26, 1 July – 30 September 2025.
- I.2 This report contains an update on performance against the SSCP Operating Plan 2025/26 which was approved by the Authority in March 2025.
- I.3 A summary of KPIs can be viewed in Appendix I.

**2. Q2 Summary**

- 2.1 Q2 continued to witness an increase in visitor numbers because of the continued good weather and attention from social media activity. This peaked during the August Bank Holiday weekend when site capacity was exceeded and there was an impact on surrounding areas and communities.
- 2.2 Except, the wider country park and Sussex Heritage Coast have all been exceptionally busy, especially at weekends. This continued to provide challenges with physical on-site capacity and staff capacity to focus on wider objectives. All brought into sharp focus the need for greater understanding and articulation of the tension between nature conservation and access for all with visitor footfall impacts on the landscape.
- 2.3 Staffing capacity improved during Q2 with a new Visitor Services Manager starting in August. Casual car park assistants were also recruited after a summer of relying on SDNPA staff support in the car parks
- 2.4 In response to the tourism impacts on site, and the wider Sussex Heritage Coast this summer, work is starting with key strategic partners to develop a 5 – 10-year Visitor Management Plan for the area, alongside specific SSCP actions. This will require much co-ordination between all parties directly concerned, engagement with wider people and groups affected and an expert in the field to advise us all and pull together such a plan.
- 2.5 The following report summarises performance in Q2 in accordance with the agreed SSCP Operating Plan. The two red reporting KPIs are due to prioritised workloads and work not scheduled with other SDNPA staff until Q3/4.

**Update on performance against KPIs**

### **3. Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery**

- 3.1 Highlights of work undertaken in Q2 to both deliver the Countryside Stewardship and manage the landscape include the following:
- 3.2 Summer grazing plans continued, with cows, calves and sheep returning alongside the resident ponies rotating across the site.
- 3.3 Installed a new line of buoys on the meanders to restrict paddleboards and kayaks from passing into key wetland habitats, after a notable increase in self-led users over the summer.
- 3.4 The vegetated shingle continued to be roped off to enable habitats to flourish in an area with high visitor footfall.
- 3.5 Continued seasonal butterfly transect and chalk grassland surveying to build on monitoring our success in managing the landscape for nature recovery.
- 3.6 Bat detection equipment installed at various locations to inform species surveys for biodiversity monitoring.
- 3.7 Continued management of sluice gates to manage water levels in the meanders and lagoons
- 3.8 Installation of new (and replacing old) benches at Hard Link and the park entrance at Exceat.
- 3.9 Installation of new park entrance gate off A259 at New Barn and the continued upgrading of pedestrian and field gates along the Country Park Trail
- 3.10 Relocation of gates at Haven Brow away from a muddy path to improve access in the winter months. (in partnership with the Access funding)
- 3.11 Continued to respond to increased occasions of graffiti and mass litter clearance incidents because of increased visitor numbers and new audiences.
- 3.12 Ongoing grass cutting, scrub clearance and general presentation maintenance in high visitor footfall areas.
- 3.13 Ragwort pulling as part of landscape control and management works.
- 3.14 Significant nature sightings during Q2 as positive indicators our nature recovery efforts are working include clouded yellow and adonis blue butterflies, red star thistle, autumn ladies tresses, autumn gentian and devils bit scabious.
- 3.15 During a recent expert visit to one of our newer dew ponds, scarce blue tailed damselflies were spotted and later confirmed as only the second sighting in Sussex this year.
- 3.16 A picture of a rare, red field grasshopper, affected by erythrism – a genetic mutation – on our social media pages drew attention from some local media outlets.
- 3.17 1 x Corporate Volunteering session delivered, Q2 is typically a quieter season.
- 3.18 Hosted 10 x other volunteering occasions including 7 South Down Volunteer sessions, 2 Youth Action Days and a beach clean as part of the Marine Conservation Society 'Great Beach Clean' event.
- 3.19 Continued to support the Countryside and Policy Manager - Eastern Area in the preparatory discussions for the launch of the Seven Sisters Super National Nature Reserve.
- 3.20 Continued to prioritise social media postings to highlight landscape views, nature, infrastructure improvements and visitor impacts eg litter instead of chalk cliff imagery - alongside visitor and safety messaging - as part of a soft launch to change perceptions and behaviours away from a municipal park to a place for nature.
- 3.21 Overall, we are in a strong position and on track delivering year 2 actions of the Countryside Stewardship. A full progress summary will be provided at the end of Q4.

### **4. First Class Visitor Destination & Seasonal Planning**

#### Long Term Ambition

- 4.1 Active engagement with Heritage Coast partners, especially Birling Gap (NT) to share travel and safety information at weekends and peak periods on social media. This will feed into the new workstream to develop a Visitor Management Plan for the area.
  - 4.2 SSCP Travel Plan still in draft, with an evolving review after the peak season to then engage with key stakeholders. This will be finalised in Q3 before engaging with other delivery partners.
  - 4.3 Engaging with East Sussex County Council (ESCC)(Highways), local Parish Council and Cuckmere Bus Company to seek resolutions to traffic management issues on the C120 (Litlington Road). ESCC Highways have made some preliminary 'fixes' to potholes and the Parish Council arranged for some seasonal shrubbery clearance. All parties have contacted ESCC Highways at Director level to seek further action and an officer / Member meeting is scheduled in Q3.
  - 4.4 Implemented, in partnership with landowners Forestry England a waymarked, off-road route between the Friston Forest and SSCP on their land, to encourage visitors off the busy Litlington Road. Way markers enroute supported by Interim signage in each car park were installed in time for the August Bank Holiday. Forestry England have committed to more permanent, directional signage from their car park.
  - 4.5 Work continues to progress to resolve legal agreements to complete the adoption of the decommissioned telephone box from BT by the South Downs National Park Trust on behalf of SDNPA. 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 legal processes are completed.
  - 4.6 Comms are also working on interior and exterior interpretation for the Shepherds Hut, following a generous £5k donation via the South Downs National Park Trust to open this asset as part of our Sense of Place activities to enhance the visitor experience and tell our stories.
- 5. Operational Delivery:**
- 5.1 The Visitor Centre manually recorded 22,468 visitors in Q2, with an average spend of £9.86, just above target. The top 5 most popular item sales were postcards, stickers and fridge magnets which reflects the tourist / souvenir markets during the period. At the end of Q1 income was reporting higher than budget due to the visitor uplift. It is noted that visitor numbers to the centre itself, are slightly lower than the same period in 2024/25, although income is up. This is considered to be for several reasons including new audiences and behaviours, full capacity car parks impacting footfall, turnover and time spent in the landscape during good weather. It should also be noted that the count is manual and there is scope for missed visitors during very busy periods.
  - 5.2 The Grab & Go recorded a spend per head of £5.40, above target. The top 4 selling items were ice cream tubs, sandwiches, water and iced coffee which supports the seasonal warm weather offer.
  - 5.3 The Southern Countries Crawley ice cream concession moved onto the south car park from the beginning of July, extending the food and beverage offer on site and providing additional income.
  - 5.4 In house, external and private hire events programme continued to evolve in Q2 providing outreach and engagement opportunities alongside income generation. Income is currently performing well as a result. Members should be mindful that Q1 and Q2 are the main income periods for event income as the Pump Barn is not a winter friendly space, but the installation of Wi-Fi in the Turkey Barn does create new opportunities for off peak business.
  - 5.5 27 private hire events took place including free SDNPA and partner 'opportunity cost' events (eg SDNPA and partner supported events), art workshops, wellness events and bookings from the NHS, Make Good Trouble and Naturebytes.
  - 5.6 7 in house events included a 'Shepherds of the South Downs' local history talk, two, free Military History talks as part of Heritage Open Days, Butterfly, Bat and Bird workshops with

wildlife experts and a demonstration by local Weavers, Spinners and Dyers – all supporting out ‘Sense of Place’ engagement stories.

- 5.7 Overall occupancy for Q2 at the Cuckmere Cottages reported at 52%, an organic growth on the previous years 44%. Kestrel, the smaller flat, continues to be the most popular reaching 60% occupancy, followed by Redshank (sleeps 6) at 50% and Skylark (sleeps 5) reporting 46%. Feedback continues to be positive with both the location and service provided by our management concession being noted. Car free does deter some guests but this is outweighed by the vast majority and is evident with repeat bookings. Negative reviews have been received about the condition of Redshank cottage, and this is being addressed over the winter.
- 5.8 During Q2, camping barn occupancy reported 46% which is considered positive as typically this quarter is the quieter period for educational and young people group bookings (eg Duke of Edinburgh, DoE). Group bookings continue to have priority, but individual bookings are being accommodated around whole site reservations. The outlook for 2026 is looking very positive with many groups already committed to repeat bookings along with new leads including a regular DoE group from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.
- 5.9 Two visitor experience volunteers continued to provide weekly litter picks estimated to be 69.75 hours in Q2. The intense on-site management required into Q2, has paused the active recruitment of additional visitor experience volunteers until Q3.
- 5.10 84 mobility hire bookings were supported in Q2, with continued support from repeat, local visitors alongside first visit visitors. Feedback continues to be positive and appreciative of the opportunity to engage with the landscape using the two scooters.
- 5.11 Social media channels (Instagram and Facebook) have continued to focus on strong imagery and messaging for nature and the landscape to showcase the conservation work rather than images of the cliffs and beach. There has also been increased safety, sustainable travel and visitor management messaging at weekends – often working with National Trust - Birling Gap - in response to high visitor numbers and viral social media presence by independent content creators.
- 5.12 The most viewed Instagram posts in Q2 were for litter discarded in a pill box, busy weekend plan ahead messaging and a fire engine attending a report for a BBQ in the park. Facebook was slightly different with a post about gate replacement topping the list instead of the fire engine.
- 5.13 SDNPA comms undertook a wider campaign with river crossing behaviours following videos from content creators crossing at high tide. It is acknowledged that a different approach could have been taken to respond to this imagery and SSCP and Comms are working on a more responsive approach going forward. This includes tide time information, safety messaging and improved signage at location in partnership with local landowners.
- 5.14 It is noted that commercial / events posts do not receive the same levels of engagement as nature and conservation images. However, utilising the Facebook events platform has continued to be a free and effective platform to promote events to more local audiences with all ticketed events selling out.

## **6. Financial Stability:**

### Asset Management

- 6.1 Completed the capital project installation of a water trough supply to Haven Brow, opening new areas of the park for grazing as part of the countryside stewardship.
- 6.2 Works are almost complete at New Barn cottage to refurbish the accommodation for a tenant. An active search for tenants who would have a real understanding of the nuances of living in the New Barn cottage are being progressed.
- 6.3 Installation of EV Chargers are underway in north car park, as part of the wider National Parks Partnership funding and arrangements with BMW. The chargers are expected to go live in Q3.

- 6.4 Feasibility works are underway for improvements to north car park with the aim to improve efficiency, capacity, pedestrian safety and disabled parking and access. Various wildlife and topographic surveying is underway along with concept designs before cost options can be progressed.
- 6.5 Refurbishment works are scheduled for the self-catering cottages and camping barn focussing on properly addressing damp and outstanding works in the gardens previously not completed.

Financial Stability

- 6.6 As reported in the main budget papers, at the end of Q2 SSCP is reporting a £113,312 favourable variance for year end – mainly due to elevated trading from increased visitor numbers. This is against a budget provision of £72K favourable variance. Car parking income plays a significant part in this position.
- 6.7 Monthly car park compliance (as in the KPIs at Appendix 1) is disappointingly reporting as amber. Members are reminded that this is a one a month compliance check by staff so is only a moment in time. July was a particularly bad month for no obvious reason, but other months showed a marked improvement. The presence of weekend car park attendants during Q2 has helped to reinforce the message that the car park is pay & display, and overall trends are being monitored.
- 6.8 There were six Sussex Film Office photo shoot / filming for both brands and students / local groups in the park during Q2. It has been a quieter year for filming requests, and we are being a bit stricter about what and where filming can take place to ensure it complements the site. For example, we restricted locations for a camping brand, so we did not have images of camping on the cliffs being used.

**7. Other implications**

<b>Implication</b>	<b>Yes*/No</b>
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 perhaps the ultimate expression of us delivering on the aims of nature recovery, access genuinely attractive for all and climate adaptation. It represents a key area of work in delivering 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. Deliberate attempts are being made to reach out to other partners and groups in the area.
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 it’s working practices and how it operates at and manages SSCP.

<b>Implication</b>	<b>Yes*/No</b>
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 there is an evolving review of opportunities to ensure equality of opportunity as far as possible for visitors.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None
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 - KPIs  
 External Consultees Director of Planning.  
 Background Documents None