

Report to **Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **19 February 2026**
By **Commercial & Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters**
Title of Report **Q3 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26**

Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

I. Receive and consider Q3 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2025/26

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 3 (Q3) of 2025/26, 1 October – 31 December 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 at **Appendix I**.

2. Q3 Summary

- 2.1 Q3 is typically a quieter period than Q1 & Q2 as the seasons and weather change and the visitor profile changes from visitors to local audiences. During Q3 we experienced frequent periods of high winds and heavy rain which impact footfall to the site. Budgets are seasonally profiled to reflect this.
- 2.2 Q3 saw the hosting of our fourth Christmas Market weekend in December which attracted high footfall and positive feedback at what would otherwise be a quiet. A dry, yet chilly festive period between Christmas and New Year saw higher than expected visitor footfall especially in car parks and in the landscape.
- 2.3 In response to the volume of visitors both to the site and wider Sussex Heritage Coast this summer, work continues to align key strategic partners to work with SDNPA to develop a 5 – 10 year Visitor Management Plan for the area, alongside specific SSCP actions.
- 2.4 The following report summarises performance in Q3 in accordance with the agreed SSCP Operating Plan. There are two red reporting KPIs impacted by staffing capacity and changes to website reporting. The addition of downloadable learning resources will now be in the proposed website revamp in 2026/27. A change in website reporting tools has impacted the trail download reporting and improving the visibility of this resource will also be part of next years website development work.

Update on performance against KPIs

3. Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery

- 3.1 Highlights of work undertaken in Q3 to deliver the Countryside Stewardship and manage the landscape include:
- 3.2 Ongoing winter grazing plans with cows, sheep and ponies moving around the site.
- 3.3 Grazing at Haven Brow and Downs units thanks to SDNPA capital investment for a water supply and troughs. This is an exciting development as previous landowners had mowed this landscape, and it is estimated that it hasn't been grazed with animals for 10 years. The c30 cows will spend most of the next year in this location preparing the land for improved chalk grassland in future years.
- 3.4 Successful short term, experimental grazing with c30 cows in unit four which includes part of the concrete beach track for the first time since 2011.
- 3.5 Culvert improvement works along the chalk path to the beach, improving water flow under the path for both the management of water levels in the wetland and improving visitor access to the beach in the winter by reducing path flooding. Funded by DEFRA Access funds.
- 3.6 The vegetated shingle continued to be roped off to enable habitats to flourish in an area with high visitor footfall.
- 3.7 Continued management of sluice gates to manage water levels in the meanders and lagoons.
- 3.8 Hosted one SDNPA All Ranger and National Park Partner Ranger day using the new robo-flail for scrub clearance and networking day.
- 3.9 Winter programme of scrub clearance underway in specific units and on lagoon islands. This includes breaking dense scrub to increase the mosaic of habitats and clearing scrub to improve areas of chalk grassland. On the lagoons, scrub clearance is part of our longer-term plans to restore the islands as wetland habitats to encourage ground nesting birds.
- 3.10 Cut and cleared Exceat 'meadow' and promoted the use of traditional scything for Youth Action Days on steep and hard to manage slopes that can't be grazed for chalk grassland restoration.
- 3.11 Cleared scrub from a pill box that had covered for some years.
- 3.12 1,800 trees and hedgerow plants planted along the boundary with A259 funded by Countryside Stewardship to create wildlife corridor and new habitats, and protective, visual and sound barrier from the main road.
- 3.13 Facilitated TB badger vaccinations to support on site grazing.
- 3.14 'Pete the Pond' carried out pond maintenance at the Foxhole dew pond.
- 3.15 Hosted three Corporate Volunteering occasions with American Express and Trusted House Sitters in partnership with the South Downs National Park Trust.
- 3.16 Hosted twelve other volunteering occasions including ten South Down Volunteer sessions, and two Youth Action Days, and continuing to support informal volunteering groups onsite undertaking litter and plastic clearance.
- 3.17 Continued to support the preparatory discussions for the launch of the Seven Sisters Super National Nature Reserve in Q4, including SSCP hosting a public launch event on World Water Day, Sunday 22 March 2026.
- 3.18 General maintenance of fences, gates and benches across the site.
- 3.19 Significant nature sightings during Q3 include clustered bellflower, round headed rampion and dwarf thistle still presenting in November and an Avocet by the meanders, which whilst not rare are occasional visitors.
- 3.20 We are actively working with our grazier to resolve the outside grazing licence. Details have required revisiting to reflect updated grazing onsite.

4. First Class Visitor Destination & Seasonal Planning

Long Term Ambition

- 4.1 Continue to actively engage with Heritage Coast partners, especially Birling Gap (National Trust) at an operational level to share travel and safety information on social media. This will feed into the new workstream to develop a Visitor Management Plan for the area.
- 4.2 SSCP Travel Plan drafted and with internal stakeholders for comment and will also feed into the Visitor Management Plan workstream.
- 4.3 A positive site meeting was held with East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Highways to explore highway boundaries and maintenance along with potential signage (off the highway) and bollard installations at key locations to address displaced parking along the C120, Litlington Lane, during busy periods. We continue to explore options for implementation in partnership with ESCC, who have been clear that any bollards installed would not be funded by ESCC, but there might be options to explore our capital funding.
- 4.4 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. There remain a few complexities to resolve, and this work has been delayed whilst other projects were prioritised.
- 4.5 SDNPA Comms continue to work on interior and exterior interpretation for the Shepherds Hut with a view to Phase I being installed in Q4. This is made possible 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.
- 4.6 The team is also working with SDNPA Comms on a new directional sign and Exceat farm interpretation to inform our sense of place and visitor engagement work.
- 5. Operational Delivery:**
- 5.1 The Visitor Centre manually recorded 11,976 visitors in Q3 - a 4.5% increase on the same period last year - with an average spend per transaction of £10.48, above the annual target of £9.50. Q3 generally delivers a slightly higher spend per transaction as the offer changes to stocking filler and gift purchases alongside souvenirs however the top 3 selling items (in units) continue to be souvenir stickers, postcards and fridge magnets. It should also be noted that the visitor count is manual and there is scope for missed visitors during very busy periods.
- 5.2 The Grab & Go recorded a spend per transaction of £5.45, above the annual target of £5.25. It is no surprise that the top 4 selling items were lattes and americano coffee, hot chocolate and flapjacks supporting the shift to colder weather.
- 5.3 In house, external and private hire events programming continued in Q3 providing outreach and engagement opportunities alongside income generation. 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 has created new opportunities for off-peak business.
- 5.4 12 private hire events took place including free SDNPA and partner 'opportunity cost' events and bookings from ESCC, National Trust alongside the Naturebytes fortnightly Saturday Club.
- 5.5 Three in house events included 3 day half term, drop in, autumn themed craft activities, an Autumn Ranger Tour and our fourth Christmas Market weekend.
- 5.6 The Christmas Market weekend is a collaboration with onsite partners Saltmarsh Farmhouse and is held on the first weekend in December. This year the Turkey Barn was included, resulting in over 40 stall holders across the site in four locations. Feedback from stallholders and visitors was very positive with many remarking that it had been one of the biggest with good quality stalls they had visited. We traded positively in the Visitor Centre, Grab & Go and the Mulled Wine bar in the Pump Barn, however the dry Saturday and wet Sunday was a good reminder on how weather impacts footfall and visitor dwell time with Sunday being much more 'transactional' than Saturday when visitors stayed longer. Our thanks extend to the SDNPA events team and other staff volunteers that helped with visitor experience and orientation over the weekend.

- 5.7 Q3 cottages and camping occupancy was impacted with the scheduled closure of the site for maintenance works from 10 November. With extended time being required to address damp and other maintenance issues, and the discovery of newts on site, the cottages will be closed for the remainder of 2025/26.
- 5.8 Overall occupancy for Q3 at the Cuckmere Cottages reported at 34%, with specific occupancy reporting Kestrel (sleeps 2) 41%, Redshank (sleeps 6) 33% and Skylark (sleeps 5) 28%. General feedback continues to be positive for the offer provided but negative comments were beginning to come through about damp and decoration which are now being addressed.
- 5.9 There were no bookings at the camping barn and field in the period 01 October to 09 November before the site closed for maintenance.
- 5.10 Two visitor experience volunteers continued to provide weekly litter picks estimated to be 51 hours in Q3. Collaboration with the central Volunteering team has refreshed volunteer role profiles for onsite events, litter pickers and site presentation roles ready for active recruitment in Q4 to build a volunteer team for the next season.
- 5.11 16 mobility hire bookings were supported in Q3, lower than previous periods but not unexpected with the weather extremes experienced. Q3 and Q4 are typically quieter periods for scooter hire due to wet and cold weather.
- 5.12 Social media channels (Instagram and Facebook) have continued to focus on regular posts with imagery and messaging to support the narrative of the park as a place for nature showcasing the conservation work rather than images of the cliffs and beach.
- 5.13 The top three most viewed Instagram posts in Q3 were two for the Christmas Market and 'dogs on leads for migratory birds' messaging. Facebook varied with the top three posts being for the Christmas Market, highlighting the railway tracks as part of our cultural heritage and a new gate on the riverbank - highlighting how different platforms reach different audiences. Facebook continues to be a good platform to promote our events to local audiences.
- 5.14 Continued working with SDNPA comms producing safety messaging for tide times, early sunset, cliff and river safety were incorporated into weekend social media stories. Work is also underway to collaborate with local partners including Southern Railway, Wealden District Council and Seaford Town Council to improve messaging between Seaford and River Cuckmere for the #sevensistershike followers.
- 5.15 Planning is also underway with SDNPA comms team for a phased refresh of the SSCP website to improve messaging on the theme of a place for nature whilst also providing useful visitor information to manage expectations and inform visitor behaviour.

6. Financial Stability:

Asset Management

- 6.1 The handover of New Barn cottage is due to be completed in January. The property has been marketed as a rental and viewings for potential tenants are underway.
- 6.2 Installation of EV Chargers is now complete, and four chargers are live for public use as part of the Podpoint network. Initial charges will be 50p p/kw which provides a small income stream to cover operating costs. The charges will be reviewed once there is data supporting the use of the chargers.
- 6.3 Feasibility work continues for improvements to north car park with the aim to improve efficiency, capacity, pedestrian safety and disabled parking and access. Work had been paused whilst the EV installation took place as the on the ground impacts were different to envisaged.
- 6.4 Refurbishment works at the Foxhole Cottages are underway with a completion date of April 2026. The works were the subject of an Urgent Action decision in January 2026 to approve the funding and procurement and are focussed on structural issues including damp and outstanding works in the gardens along with other minor repairs. The discovery of newts

has delayed the project into Q1 of 2026/27, and the cottages will remain closed for 4-5 months.

Financial Stability

- 6.5 At the end of Q3, the SSCP budget was reporting a favourable position of £100k. The full financial position is reported as part of the SDNPA financial update.
- 6.6 Car Park compliance in Q3 was 85.5%. 81% in November and 90% in December. This is based on a one day a month compliance check by staff so is only a snapshot in time. With no car park enforcement regime and improvement works to north car park scheduled for 2026 that will reduce ‘freeform’ parking, it is suggested that the 90% compliance target set at the start of the year was ambitious and 85% would be a more realistic figure going forward.
- 6.7 There were five Sussex Film Office bookings in Q3 for independent filming and brand photoshoots. 2025/26 has been quieter for location requests but Sussex Film Office have confirmed that interest is renewing in general.

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 its working practices and how it operates 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.

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 Appendices I. Q3 SSCP 2025-26 KPIs
 External Consultees Director of Placemaking; Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer.
 Background Documents None