

Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2026-27

Introduction

Seven Sisters Country Park is owned and operated by South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA). It is part of one of the most iconic landscapes in the UK and a place of international significance. Renowned worldwide for its dramatic chalk cliffs, sweeping downland and unspoilt coastline, the park is a defining symbol of England's natural heritage and a gateway to the South Downs National Park. Its distinctive landscape, rich biodiversity and powerful sense of place attract visitors from across the globe, offering moments of inspiration, reflection and connection with nature. SSCP comprises 280 hectares of protected landscape together with buildings and curtilage at Exceat, New Barn and Foxhole, it is part of the Seaford to Beachy Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and will shortly be designated as part of the new National Nature Reserve (NNR)

The site is managed with three core principles in mind, driving ambition and operational delivery:

- Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery
- First Class Visitor Destination and Seasonal Planning
- Financial Stability & Asset Management

The previous 2025/26 season provided the perfect mix with six months of sunshine alongside a growth in visitor numbers and increasing further new audiences - in part because of #sevensisterhike trending on social media. This resulted in an extended summer period with high visitor footfall exploring the natural environment across the Sussex Heritage Coast. These visitor numbers also highlighted operational issues around SSCP, and other sites, such as

- car park capacity,
- traffic management,
- footpath erosion,
- river and cliff safety,
- lack of understanding of the natural world, and
- traffic displacement in the local community.

The focus for the 2026/27 Operating Plan is to continue evolving the business model. This is against a background of increasing focus on the importance and value of nature, both here and in the wider Sussex Heritage Coast. There is growing emphasis on increasing the focus of nature recovery and managing the visitor experience accordingly, coinciding with the declaration, celebration and new opportunities created by the super National Nature Reserve.

This is whilst recognising the potential challenges and opportunities of a major visitor destination within a protected landscape, and the need to be commercially sound. All three core principles outlined relate to the wider National Park delivery objectives.

Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery

As currently the only landscape within the National Park owned by the Authority, SSCP places responsibilities on SDNPA both as a riparian landowner and custodians of land designated within the Seaford to Beachy Head SSSI. It provides the opportunity for the National Park to demonstrate exemplar practices for nature recovery and incorporating climate change adaptation. The

custodianship of the SSCP landscape and its natural assets are driven by the key principles of rest, reset, adapt and build resilience.

The Seven Sisters Country Park Landscape Management Plan provides the long-term strategic vision for the landscape, with a five-year action plan for 2021 – 2026. This operating plan focuses on delivery objectives for 2026/27. The SSCP Landscape Management Plan (LMP) will be due for organisation review for 2027. A Members workshop has recently taken place and discussions from the event will form part of this review.

Notwithstanding future deliberations and inline with the existing LMP, in 2024, a five-year Countryside Stewardship Agreement was confirmed. This provides annual revenue funding plus capital works providing a framework and responsibilities for land management. This is not however an exclusive programme and SDNPA are able to progress additional land management projects outside of the Countryside Stewardship Agreement subject to the necessary permissions and corporate ambitions. This was most visibly demonstrated during the wetland improvement works funded by the DEFRA Water in protected Landscapes fund.

Conserving a protected landscape, whilst also attracting high numbers of visitors often coming to view the iconic Seven Sisters cliffs does bring challenges. There are opportunities to showcase improving practise in such areas as permissive paths, management and visitor management affecting habitats and protected species in SSSI designated landscape.

The focus for 2026/27 will be continued delivery in year 3 of our Countryside Stewardship and building upon existing work to increase wildlife. We will monitor and manage this diverse landscape and its habitats, feeding into the wider National Park objectives for Nature Recovery, Climate Change and ensuring Access for All.

The long-term ambition is to improve the overall SSSI conditions from ‘unfavourable’ to ‘unfavourable recovering’ to ‘favourable’. That measure of success will be down to all landowners working in partnership along the Heritage Coast and it is for Natural England to decide any status changes to the SSSI.

The launch of the Seven Sisters National Nature Reserve in March 2026, and the development of management framework will create new opportunities to work collaboratively and at scale with other landowners in the area and this will be pursued in 2026/27.

Our work to manage this landscape will be achieved by:

I. Continuing to deliver year 3 actions of Countryside Stewardship Agreement which will include a focus on:

- Continued seasonal grazing programme to manage chalk grassland and marshland grazing to monitor impacts over time using ponies, cattle and sheep
- Monitoring the impact of new grazing at Haven Brow with a long-term view to improve a unit of chalk grassland after a long period of no grazing.
- Ongoing programme of scrub clearance to create a mosaic of habitats and improve chalk grassland.
- Ongoing maintenance of landscape infrastructure e.g. fencing, troughs, gates
- Commence scraping of grass and reseeding chalk grassland in areas of low quality with a long-term view to improve diversity and recover areas of Chalk Grassland - as part of our Countryside Stewardship Agreement.

- Continue to make wetland improvements such as improving the lagoon islands to recover nesting habitats, managing sward lengths via year-round grazing programmes and proactively managing water levels.
- 2. Continuing to deliver Nature Recovery objectives which will include:**
- Conserve and enhance the landscape of SSCP, incorporating outcomes into Corporate Plan performance reporting and deliver the actions outlined above in our role as landowner.
 - Support the delivery of the key aims of SDNPA Partnership Management Plan and the Protected Landscape Targets & Outcomes Framework (PLTOF), specifically
 - i. Target 2 – Bring all SSCP SSSIs features to achieve favourable condition by 2042
 - ii. Target 3 - All the SSSI features within the SSCP SSSI to have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by
- 3. Continue to work with external partners to develop a management framework for the new Seven Sisters National Nature Reserve (NNR), as the landowner of SSCP.**
- Contribute towards the development of the joint Management Framework
 - Contribute through offering SSCP facilities in support of collaborative/partnership working, such as hosting meetings and wider engagement events /interpretation opportunities
 - Seek opportunities to work in collaboration for nature recovery projects at scale with other partners.
- 4. Continue to develop onsite messaging to promote as a place for nature supporting key habitat and species conservation within the landscape**
- Targeted signage and messaging during grazing, ground nesting and chalk grassland seasons to promote nature conservation and visitor behaviours within a protected landscape.
 - Key landscape-based messaging focus this year will be:
 - Dogs on Leads during key seasons building on the Take the Lead campaign.
 - Wetland conservation messaging targeting paddleboarders and nature
 - Countryside Code messaging – sticking to paths, closing gates, take litter home
 - No fires or BBQs within the protected landscape
 - Cliff and River safety
 - Continue to participate in the wider Sussex Heritage Coast suicide prevention messaging and operations
- 5. Develop an evidence base as a record of long-term nature recovery.**
- Build on the existing annual and periodic species and habitat monitoring surveys conducted in house, with commissioned experts and working with students and local groups. Alongside regular chalk grassland and butterfly surveys, this year’s survey work will include dew ponds, reptiles, static bat detectors and the vegetated shingle, along with amalgamating bird surveys captured via Inaturalist and other sources.
 - Continue to build a photograph archive of on-site improvements, species and habitats as a monitoring record and to use as an evidence base, for social media and visitor messaging.

- Continue to promote participation with the three photo posts on site for citizen science landscape monitoring.
 - Encourage visitor participation in citizen science events such as the RSPB Garden Birdwatch and Big Butterfly count.
- 6. Provide landscape conservation volunteering opportunities for a range of audiences including:**
- Corporate Volunteering in partnership with South Downs National Park Trust which also generate an income
 - Regular Youth Action Days for 16 – 24year olds and work experience placements
 - Supporting learning and community groups undertaking voluntary beach clean activities not organised by SSCP
 - Provide opportunities to engage with traditional landscape management skills such as scything as part of regular landscape management practices.
- 7. Work with internal and external partners to provide a range of lifelong learning opportunities to engage with nature including:**
- Promote and encourage self-led citizen science opportunities eg RSPB Garden Birdwatch, Butterfly Count, promoting the use of i-naturalist to capture species data as part of the in-house events programme and Rangers engaging with visitors in the landscape
 - Supporting learning via SDNPA and self-led learning visits alongside our ‘talk and tour’ events programme.

First Class Visitor Destination & Seasonal Planning

A key focus of 2026/27 will be promoting Seven Sisters Country Park as a place for nature alongside a visitor attraction to manage the challenges and conflicts that can arise from a working landscape with high visitor footfall both on site and as part of the wider Sussex Heritage Coast.

This operating plan seeks to respond to the continued learned seasonal demands and visitor needs for immediate implementation for the 2026/27 season, alongside longer-term ambitions for visitor management at scale along the Sussex Heritage Coast.

Delivery of objectives under this heading will be separated between long term ambition and operational delivery for 2026/27.

Long term Ambition

- I. To work with Sussex Heritage Coast partners to commission a **Growth Strategy for Nature, Economy and Community** for the Sussex Heritage Coast to support nature, economy and community at scale over the next 5 – 10 years.
 - Agree a vision for the Sussex Heritage Coast to improve visitor and traffic management, help suicide prevention and support the local economy within the context of a protected landscape.
 - Share this high-level vision with Mayoral candidates as advocates of how activity in a protected landscape can support local economies.
 - Commission a 5 -10year delivery plan for all partners, to engage with local communities, businesses and wider partners to ensure buy in and delivery.

- Agree shared communications and messaging for visits to the Sussex Heritage Coast

2. Continue to build the ‘Sense of Place’ for visitor experience delivery to inform:

- Visitor interpretation, communications messaging and products to suit a range of audiences and seasonal demand, integrating shared branding with NNR when available.
 - Continue to tell the cultural heritage, species and habitat stories of the site to create connections with audiences promoting a wider understanding of the landscape
 - Prepare capital and fundraising bids to support phased costed delivery of the above
 - To undertake a phased refresh of the SSCP website, supporting the themes of Visitor, Nature and Get Involved to reflect the nature and protected landscape unique selling points of the area, whilst improving safety and visiting messages in the wider context of the Sussex Heritage Coast.
3. To continue to advocate to East Sussex County Council (ESCC) the need for a safe visitor crossing across the A259 at Exceat. Developing the feasibility work underway and securing funding for potential delivery after 2027
 4. Following the completion of a delivery plan for the north car park, complete feasibility and delivery of phase one of a natural play space funded by CIL, to encourage engagement with nature and provide an additional resource to extend dwell time and encourage off season local patronage.

Operational Delivery 2026-27:

1. Continue to operate a 364-day Visitor Centre offer (closed Christmas Day) to support visitors to SSCP, Friston Forest and the wider Sussex Heritage Coast, with a seasonal retail offer to offset the costs of operating a free information service. Success will be monitored using average spend per transaction of £9.65 as an indicator of success. Opening hours will continue as 10am-5pm between April – October and 10am – 4pm November to March.
2. Continue to operate the Grab & Go takeaway food and beverage service offering core products and seasonal variants to respond to visitor demand. Success will be monitored using average spend per transaction of £5.50 as an indicator of success. Opening hours will continue as 10am-5pm between April – October and 10am – 4pm November to March with the option of earlier closing in the quieter months of November and January.
3. In both commercial outlets we will continue to support local artists, makers and suppliers alongside mainstream ranges to promote and support local businesses.
4. Continue to manage the two-year ice cream concession in south car park offering an alternative cold drink and ice cream offer and extended opening hours to meet visitor demand.

5. To participate in the annual Visit England Visitor Attractions Assessment as a measure of success and seek to maintain, and ideally increase the 2025/26 score of 81%, being mindful that onsite tenants, where we have no operational control, are also included in the assessment and could impact final scores. Consideration will be given in 2026/27 on the value of continuing to participate in the scheme when there are factors outside of our direct control.
6. To continue to offer a diverse, year-round programme of events and engagement opportunities supporting our sense of place and visitor experience taking a direct and indirect delivery role whilst also supporting the delivery of Partnership Management Plan key aims. The 2026/27 events programme will include:
 - Inhouse talks and events focusing on nature, cultural heritage, seasonal highlights and regional / national themes such as Dark Skies, ReNature, school holiday activities/ trails, Christmas and Heritage Open Days.
 - Private hire activities – public events that add to the visitor offer / events programme (eg art exhibitions) organised by third parties generating their own income.
 - Partnership events - with key delivery partners including in house and external; stakeholders to deliver nature-based engagement /cultural heritage / wellbeing opportunities.
7. To continue to manage the performance of the Cuckmere Cottages & Camping management concession. This will enhance the delivery and use of the self-catering cottages and camping barn and field as part of the visitor offer. The measure of success for the cottages will be occupancy rates. The camping barn measure of success will also be occupancy rates alongside the narrative of youth engagement groups using the site.
8. 2026/27 will see the creation a new team of volunteers supporting events and engagement activities, litter picking and site presentation (eg weeding at Exceat). The first phase of recruitment will focus on establishing a team and monitoring the support they provide with a view to growing the range of volunteer opportunities in the future. This work will be supported by the SDNPA volunteer team.
9. Continue to promote and increase usage of two mobility scooters for visitors with mobility restrictions, enabling visitors to engage with nature and the park; and agreeing with National Trust to adopt two additional scooters to expand our visitor offer during 2026/27 contributing to AIM 5 in the Partnership Management Plan.
10. Continue regular posting on social media channels promoting cliff and river safety, landscape management, cultural heritage, events and commercial activities. This to support the local community concerns and share conservation messages.

Financial Stability

As the owners of SSCP, SDNPA have a responsibility to maintain and conserve the landscape and all the assets within the country park including their structural integrity, health, safety and function

of this public site, to support the objective of being a first-class visitor attraction. With increased visitor demand and an aged, historical asset this needs to be managed carefully.

Long Term Ambition

Owning an asset comes with responsibilities and need for investment. Therefore, achieving an operational surplus and financial stability is a necessary key objective of operating SSCP.

The primary objectives to achieve our statutory purposes and the two principles around exemplary land management and first-class visitor experience can only be achieved by financial stability. In that regard the ongoing financial objective is to invest in and maintain safe visitor spaces and facilities and create an operational surplus to set aside a contingency fund.

In this way we can ensure that income generated from commercial activity over and above the points above are earmarked for future investment, alongside capital expenditure to support new commercial opportunities.

Asset Management

As owners of the site, the asset management priorities for 2026/27 will include:

- Improvements to the layout and functionality of the north car park to include drainage, pedestrian walkways, accessible parking and maximizing capacity within the space currently available.
- Completing the programme of improvement works at Foxhole Cottages
- To continue with mandatory inspections, repairs and maintenance

Financial Stability

SSCP operates an increasingly diverse range of income streams to offset the operational costs of managing the landscape. This enables the provision of high-quality safe visitor facilities and investment in nature whilst reducing reliance on single income activities.

Financial performance is regularly monitored and reported to the SDNPA Policy & Resources Committee and National Park Authority as part of the standard corporate financial reporting procedures.

Draft Budget overview for 2026/27

The table below is a high level summary of each performance area and the projected outturn for the 2026/27 budget. This table reflects the operational delivery of SSCP. There remain core costs of the ownership of SSCP that are not reflected in the text below. A more detailed summary is highlighted in appendix 2.

	£000's	
Core Costs	£297,285	unfavourable
Car Parking	-£285,057	Favourable
Events	-£23,782	Favourable
Holiday Cottages	-£11,331	Favourable
Landscapes	-£46,257	Favourable
Visitor Centre	£15,374	unfavourable

Food Outlets	-£75,269	Favourable
New Barn Cottage	-£12,142	Favourable
Total	-£141,178	Favourable

- Additional costs for SDNPA that are not direct operational costs are held in central cost centres and include the annual payment to ESCC on acquisition of the land by SDNPA (revenue provision).
- **Car Parks**
 - Following the 2025/26 parking charge increases and tariff structure changes there are no plans to increase parking in 2026/27 in line with nearby operators opting for alternate year increases. This will time well with the proposed completion of the north car park works and the next tariff increases when we can demonstrate investment in relation to charges. The table below demonstrates SSCP car park charges in relation to other local providers at the time of writing this document:

Vehicle	Tariff	SSCP	Birling Gap	Beachy Head	Friston Forest	South Hill Barn
Cars	Up to 1 hr		£1.65	£1.50		Free Parking
	Up to 2 hrs	£3.50	£3.30	£3.00	£3.00	
	Up to 4hrs	£5.00		£4.40	£4.50	
	Over 4hrs	£7.00	£8.00 May - Sept / £6.60 winter	£6.30	£5.50	
Coaches / Minibus	Half Day	£10.00		£10.00		
	Full Day	£20.00		£20.00		
Other parking options		FE Permit	NT Membership		FE Permit	

- In addition to direct pay & display income we will continue to receive an income share from Forestry England for the local and national car park passes permitted to park at SSCP, which offers an affordable option for local, regular audiences e.g. dog walkers.
- A small income stream is anticipated from the provision of 4 x up to 7kwh electric vehicle chargers that should cover the cost of provision and provide a small surplus. The chargers have only recently been installed and usage and costs will be monitored into 2026/27.
- **On site leases and licensing agreements:**
 - In 2026/27 we will continue to generate income from onsite tenants and licensing agreements which are included in the **core costs budget** and will include
 - Saltmarsh Farmhouse Cafe – percentage turnover for 2025/26 accounts
 - Cuckmere Cycle Company – percentage turnover for 2025/06 accounts

- ESCC / Buzz Active – currently zero rental as part of the purchase agreement
 - Natural England office rent agreement
 - Farm Business Tenancy for North Brooks
 - New Barn rental tenancy
- **On site concessions**
 - In 2026/27 there will be two onsite concessions generating an income:
 - Fixed fee and % of turnover of combined self-catering cottage and camping income which appears in the cottages budget
 - Annual fee for ice cream concession which appears in the food and beverage budget
- **Visitor Centre**
 - Profiled budget for income generated via the sale of souvenirs, gifts, local crafts and artists products, books, maps and children’s toys, responding to the anticipated seasonal business fluctuations of an outdoor landscape.
- **Food & Beverage**
 - Profiled budget for income generated via the sale of take away drinks, sandwiches, snacks, ice creams, responding to the seasonal business fluctuations of an outdoor landscape, and no provision of wet weather seating spaces due to other onsite business agreements.
 - Maximise opportunities to provide refreshments and lunches to ad hoc private hire events and groups visits, including the Pump Barn licensed bar service.
- **Events**
 - Profiled budget for income generated from room hire of the Pump Barn and Turkey Barn as meeting and event spaces.
 - Profiled budget for income generated from ticket sales for inhouse events
 - Record of ‘opportunity costs’ when spaces are used by SDNPA and partners for delivery objectives eg wellbeing and education outreach, NRR meetings,
 - Continue to work with Sussex Film Office, to promote SSCP as an ad hoc filming location subject to market demand.
 - Ad hoc receipts of licence fee for third party event organisers using SSCP for events e.g. Charity walks and marathons where there is an impact on staff time or the landscape.
- **Landscape Management**
 - Annual payment in the region of £168k from the Rural Payments Agency for Countryside Stewardship Scheme duties.
 - Income generated from corporate volunteering bookings
 - Ad hoc opportunities to apply for funding for specific projects as they arise.
- **Donations**
 - Maximise opportunities to promote suggested donations after the use of the mobility scooters

- Continue to promote donations to South Downs National Park Trust via coin and card donation points and legacy promotion on the SSCP website.

- **Operating Costs**

There are many general costs associated with owning assets, managing a landscape and operating a safe, first-class visitor attraction. Some do not have a direct income activity to offset costs. Costs across all budget areas are regularly monitored to keep this to a minimum but some are hard to directly influence. They include:

- SSCP operates with 7 FTE core staff these being Commercial & Strategic Manager, Country Park Manager, Visitor Services Manager, Visitor Services Officer, Senior Park Ranger, Park Ranger x 2 part time posts and Operations Assistant.
- New for 2026/27 will be the creation of several part time, Grade 1 Visitor Experience Assistants delivering the key frontline Visitor Centre and Grab & Go services, moving away from too much use of casual contracts. These staff will continue to be supported by a smaller number of seasonal and casual contracts responding to seasonal demand, including new the recruitment of a bank of casual car park assistants to manage seasonal car park capacity. This creates an additional budget pressure of £25k which is covered by the operational 'surplus'.
- Subject to the final settlement from DEFRA, an in-principle agreement is in place for the recruitment of a second, grade 2, full time Park Ranger. This post provides extra resource to ensure safe working in the park, seven day a week outdoor coverage and extra capacity to responding to increasing asset responsibilities such as the checks at New Barn cottage.
- Premises costs including utilities, business rates, insurances, security and alarm contracts, electric vehicle chargers, waste collections and septic / sewage plant emptying contracts. As highlighted earlier in this plan there is an ambition to instal solar panels which will contribute to a reduction in energy costs.
- Annual payment to East Sussex County Council, increased in line with RPI.
- Non-revenue items are summarised at appendix 2.
- Cost of sales for retail and food and beverage outlets is closely monitored. All supplies are increasing prices in response to changing economic conditions which will result in carefully considered price increases on site to achieved income targets, whilst not out pricing audience demands.

Appendix I: Summary of KPIs

Performance is regularly monitored and reported to the SDNPA Policy & Resources Committee and National Park Authority as part of the standard corporate KPI procedures.

Objective	KPI	Reporting mechanism	Reported	Annual Measure
Exemplar Land Management & Nature Recovery	Delivery against Countryside stewardship Agreement to showcase improvements to habitat conditions and biodiversity.	Annual Review	Annual	
	No. Corporate Volunteer Activities	NP4ALL log	Quarterly	12
	No. of volunteer activities	NP4ALL log	Quarterly	50
First Class Visitor Destination Visitor Engagement & Seasonal Planning	Average Spend per Transaction in Visitor Centre	SSCP systems	Quarterly	Over £9.65
	Average Spend per Transaction in Food & Beverage	SSCP systems	Quarterly	Over £5.45
	Annual Visit England Visitor Attraction Assessment	SSCP systems	Annual	Over 81%
	No. private hire events	SSCP systems	Quarterly	75
	No. In house events	SSCP systems	Quarterly	20
	No. of volunteering activities	NP4ALL log	Quarterly	100
	No. mobility scooter hires	SSCP data	Quarterly	150
	Cottages Occupancy Rate (allows for rebuild of business after long closure period)	SSCP data	Quarterly	Over 55%
	Camping Barn & Field Occupancy Rate	SSCP data	Quarterly	Over 40%
	Car park compliance checks	SSCP data	Quarterly	Over 90%

Appendix 2:

2.1 Budget for 2026/27 - Revenue budget – This is incorporated in the SDNPA Place Making Directorate budget for approval at NPA. (Negative figures represent income).

Sum of 26-27 Proposed Budget	Pay/NonPay/Income				
	Cost Centre Nominal	Income	Non Pay	Pay	Total
Seven Sisters Car Parking	-£322,428		£37,371		-£285,057
Seven Sisters Core Costs	-£50,638		£208,926	£138,997	£297,285
Seven Sisters Events	-£27,882		£4,100		-£23,782
Seven Sisters Food Outlets	-£212,607		£65,940	£71,398	-£75,269
Seven Sisters Holiday Cottages	-£26,000		£14,669		-£11,331
Seven Sisters Landscapes	-£169,100		£7,165	£115,678	-£46,257
Seven Sisters New Barn Cottage	-£24,000		£11,858		-£12,142
Seven Sisters Visitor Centre	-£149,914		£93,890	£71,398	£15,374
Grand Total	-£982,569		£443,920	£397,471	£141,178

2.2 Capital investment planned for 2026-27

An allocation of up to £250K has been identified in the draft capital plan for improvements to north car park.

Further capital investment may be approved by the NPA should funding become available. The SDNPA is currently unsighted on the capital allocation that may be made by DEFRA in 2026-27.

2.3 Asset Valuation

A valuation of the SSCP for the end of 2025-26 is currently underway. Prior year valuation was assessed at £8m by Savills. In the 2025-26 financial year, capital investment at new barn cottage has been completed which will impact on the valuation. Further investment planned in 2026-27 (see above) will impact on subsequent valuations.

The impact of the SDNPA investing in its assets will improve several accounting ratios which might be used to determine the financial sustainability of the organisation.