

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **20 March 2026**
By **Commercial & Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters**
Title of Report **Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2026-27**
Decision

Recommendation:

The Authority is recommended to:

- 1. Approve the Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2026-27 as set out in appendix I.**
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval of the Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan for 2026/27.
- 1.2 Seven Sisters Country Park is owned and operated by South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA). It comprises of 280 hectares of protected landscape which includes part of the Seaford to Beachy Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) together with buildings and surrounding curtilage at Exceat, New Barn and Foxhole.
- 1.3 The site was purchased and received asset and resource investment with three core principles in mind, driving ambition and operational delivery and these continue to be reflected in the Operating Plan objectives for the coming year:
 - Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery
 - First Class Visitor Destination and Seasonal Planning
 - Financial Stability & Asset Management
- 1.4 The three core themes relate to the wider National Park objectives especially Nature Recovery and National Park for All.

2. Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2026/27

- 2.1 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
- 2.2 The detailed Operating Plan is attached to this report as **Appendix I**, but under the key principles of operation, the key delivery themes are highlighted below:

3. Exemplar Land Management for Nature Recovery

- 3.1 Continuing to deliver Year 3 actions for the Countryside Stewardship Agreement.
- 3.2 Continuing to contribute to corporate nature recovery objectives as identified in the Partnership Management Plan (PMP).
- 3.3 Continuing to work with external partners to develop a management framework for the new National Nature Reserve (NNR) as a landowner.
- 3.4 Continue to develop onsite messaging to promote as a place for nature supporting key habitats and species conservation within the landscape.
- 3.5 Develop an evidence base as a record of long-term nature recovery
- 3.6 Provide landscape conservation volunteering opportunities for a range of audiences.
- 3.7 Work with internal and external partners to provide a range of lifelong learning opportunities to engage with nature.

4. First Class Visitor Destination and Seasonal Planning

- 4.1 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 -1-0 years.
- 4.2 Continue to build the 'Sense of Place' for visitor experience to inform future interpretation and engagement opportunities, integrating with the National Nature Reserve brand.
- 4.3 To advocate with East Sussex County Council the need for a safe visitor crossing at the A259
- 4.4 Continue to evolve the visitor offer at the Visitor Centre and Grab & Go to meet seasonal trends and diverse audiences to generate income to offset costs.
- 4.5 Continue to evolve the inhouse and private hire event and engagement opportunities to attract diverse audiences and generate an income to offset costs.
- 4.6 Continue to manage the two-year ice cream concession in south car park.
- 4.7 Continue to manage the Cuckmere Cottages & Camping management concession contract for the onsite accommodation offer.
- 4.8 To create a new team of visitor experience volunteers supporting litter picking, visitor welcome and site presentation.
- 4.9 Continue to promote the use of mobility scooters
- 4.10 To undertake a phased refresh of www.sevensisters.org.uk with a focus on nature first and continue to create social media content to engage with audiences.

5. Financial Stability & Asset Management

- 5.1 Continue to maintain and invest in the built assets at Seven Sisters Country Park.
- 5.2 Increased staffing costs as a result of moving away from the use of casual staffing contracts in key frontline services, casual car park assistants and the creation of a new Ranger position.
- 5.3 To secure planning permission to undertake improvements to the layout and functionality of the north car park to create an efficient, safe, visitor focussed environment.
- 5.4 Continue to effectively manage all leases, licensing and concession contracts that generate income to offset operational costs.
- 5.5 Monitor and manage profiled budgets for all inhouse income generation activities allowing for seasonal trends to offset operational costs.
- 5.6 Ensure compliance delivery of the Countryside Stewardship to ensure continue payment from the Rural Partnership Agency.
- 5.7 Effective management of all costs associated with owning and operating the Seven Sisters Country Park.

- 5.8 Optimising donations and legacy opportunities in partnership with the South Downs Trust.
- 5.9 At the time of writing, it is projected that the draft 2026/27 budget for Seven Sisters Country Park will return a £140k surplus to be reinvested in the site or contribute to the Authority costs of owning and maintaining SSCP as an asset.

Cost Centre	Income	Non-pay expenditure	Pay expenditure	Total
Car Parking	£322,428	£37,371	£0	£285,057
Core Costs	£50,638	£208,926	£138,997	-£297,285
Events	£27,882	£4,100	£0	£23,782
Food Outlets	£212,607	£65,940	£71,398	£75,269
Holiday Cottages	£26,000	£14,669	£0	£11,331
Landscapes	£169,100	£7,165	£115,678	£46,257
New Barn Cottage	£24,000	£11,858	£0	£12,142
Visitor Centre	£149,914	£93,890	£71,398	-£15,374
Grand Total	£982,569	-£443,920	-£397,471	£141,179

6. Performance Indications and Budget reporting

- 6.1 The 2026/27 Business Plan proposes a suite of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), included in the Operating Plan at **Appendix I**, that will be included in the wider SDNPA reporting mechanisms, and along with the budget monitoring procedures, will be reported to the quarterly Policy & Resources Committee.

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?	The Business Plan delivery and the Seven Sisters budget for 2026/27 have been created within existing operational budgets.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	KPIs and regular budget monitoring will ensure that the Authority's assets are being effectively managed having regard to our wider Purposes.
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	The SSCP is an active part of the NNR discussions and works with other partners in the locality and via the wider Authority work

Implication	Yes*/No
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 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 and actions 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
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 The main risk associated with operating SSCP is that we are unable to meet the objectives around our three core principles due to factors such as a lack of investment into the assets to ensure they are maintained to a high standard, not meeting budget projections due to internal management, or external influences beyond operational control (e.g. extreme weather events, social media trends, pandemic). The Operating Plan presents how the Authority proposes to meet its three core principles within the resources available.
- 8.2 Other significant risks at SSCP are monitored on the Corporate Risk Register which is reviewed quarterly by the Policy and Resources Committee.

CLAIRE ONSLOW

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Appendices: I. Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2026/27.

External Consultees: Director of Placemaking; Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer; Legal Services.

Background Documents: None