

An aerial photograph of the Eastbourne Downland Estate. The foreground shows a grassy hillside with a wooden bench and a wire fence. The middle ground features rolling green hills and a valley filled with residential buildings. The background is a hazy, distant view of the sea and coastline.

EASTBOURNE DOWNLAND ESTATE

WHOLE ESTATE PLAN 2020-2045

EASTBOURNE
Borough Council



Developing the Vision

Visitor Data Analysis

A desktop analysis of visitor numbers was undertaken using the Outdoor Recreation Valuation Tool (ORVal), which was developed by the University of Exeter for Defra. ORVal is an online tool that allows users to explore the recreational use and welfare value of accessible open spaces, trails, and beaches in England and Wales. It has recently been incorporated into the UK Treasury's Green Book – the government's guidance for project appraisal and evaluation (H.M. Treasury 2018)⁴ – and features in the Government's 25-Year Environment Plan (H.M. Government 2018). ORVal estimates that 940,911 visits are made to the Eastbourne Downland Estate each year, and that these visits are associated with recreational values of £2.3 million per year. Analysis of visitors' walking routes across the Estate suggests a very strong link with the National Trust owned Birling Gap and the Seven Sisters, via the South Downs Way. This testifies the place the Estate has as a gateway for recreational walkers in the South Downs National Park. Far fewer visitors explore the rest of the Estate, and those that do tend to be local Eastbourne residents.

Consultation with the National Park

The following key priorities were identified for the Estate through discussions with SDNPA officers:

Improving connections between Eastbourne residents and the Estate – particularly those in the town who are not currently engaged with the Downland. The Estate should be seen as a place that everyone can enjoy, helping to build a sense of place and develop relationships with their community and the land. The contribution the Estate can make to residents' health and wellbeing should be emphasised.

⁴ HM Treasury (2018) The Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation [online] available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/685903/The_Green_Book.pdf (last accessed 09 Dec 2019)

Promoting the Estate as an educational resource, encouraging young people to enjoy it, care for it, value it, and understand how its special qualities and habitats should be managed.

Investing in natural capital and ensuring that ecosystem services are embedded in decision-making and management principles.

Identifying opportunities for strategic investment in habitat creation and restoration, to help extend, buffer, and join up ecological networks across the South Downs.

Looking for added-value opportunities from the significant visitor footfall. Eastbourne and the Estate are an important gateway to the National Park, and there is also enormous potential offered by the south coast Heritage Trail and the South Downs Way.

Encouraging and incentivising good environmental land management. The UK's departure from the Common Agricultural Policy, and the formulation of a new subsidy regime based on public payments for public goods, can help to deliver the step-change required to mainstream the environment into the way the Estate is managed and farmed.

Exploring 'payments for ecosystem services' schemes. There are potentially opportunities to deliver revenue returns and reduce costs by crystallising the value of ecosystem services delivered by the Estate – from soil carbon sequestration (the long-term storage of carbon in plants, soils, geologic formations, and the ocean) and air pollution mitigation, to water filtration and flood attenuation.

Managing woodland and chalk grassland on the Estate, and restoring and re-creating priority habitat that has been lost to scrub encroachment.

Consultation with EBC Councillors

Internal stakeholder workshops with EBC Councillors identified the following key priorities:

Maximising the social value of the Estate. Maximising the social and cultural value of the Estate, specifically:

- The Estate's contribution to Eastbourne's sense of community and belonging;
- The Estate's role in building connections among people that helps to ensure community cohesion and mental and physical wellbeing;
- The importance of instilling a sense of community ownership and involvement in decision-making;
- The Estate's role providing opportunities for communities to take part in a full range of cultural, sport, leisure, creative activities and events;
- Promoting health and wellbeing through the environment;
- The Estate's role in providing high quality recreational and open space;
- The Estate's role as an important educational resource.

Enhancing the natural value of the Estate. The importance of investing in the 'natural capital' of the Estate – its habitats and natural features – to maintain and enhance its special qualities, its iconic landscape, its wildlife, and the ecosystem services that flow from it.

Improving the visitor experience and capturing the benefits of tourism. The potential the Estate offers as a 'gateway' to the South Downs National Park, its iconic downland landscape and historical significance, and the significant number of UK and foreign visitors. Promoting and improving the visitor experience, with added-value tourism ventures, and capturing more of the visitor spend on the Estate.

Seeking opportunities to realise revenue returns. Exploring income opportunities beyond agricultural rental income, and working with the farm tenants to capitalise on other potential opportunities – including different farming systems (such as viticulture – the cultivation and harvesting of grapes), renewables, leisure and tourism enterprises, 'habitat banking', and emerging 'payments for ecosystem services' schemes. Reducing

ongoing costs associated with maintenance of the water infrastructure on the Estate is a priority.



Consultation with public stakeholders

Consultation with public stakeholders identified the following key priorities:

Maintaining and enhancing the heritage assets on the Estate. All of the downland should be treated as archaeologically sensitive, and it should be recognised that the Estate forms an integral part of the wider downland landscape. The Estate should be conserved "as it is".

Visitor Profile. The visitor profile is a function of more than just transport links: there are other barriers to engaging new audiences, such as the provision of appropriate information, the facilities available and ensuring there is publicly available information about the Estate in the town.

Water supply infrastructure. There is a private water supply system on the Estate, owned by the Council. This system is very old and costly to maintain, and there is the risk of insufficiency due to leaks on the system,

Visitor offering at Beachy Head. There is currently no high-profile visitor centre or 'hub' to which visitors are drawn. Beachy Head is a major tourist attraction, bringing in hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Estate, but lacks a strong sense of arrival or a place to which visitors are drawn in order to understand the Estate and enhance their experience of it. The Countryside Centre performs a critical role disseminating visitor information at the point of need, but there is a need for more exhibition space, an educational and meetings venue, and a hub to co-ordinate and



provide direction to experiences and activities elsewhere on the Estate.

Public cliff safety for all visitors. Many visitors attending take risks on the eroding cliff edges, despite cliff safety warnings.

Opportunities

Change of use for redundant buildings. There are a number of building assets on the Estate that are surplus to the requirements of modern agriculture, but due to their architectural merit are worthy of retention and need a new economic viable use. Many of these buildings are structurally sound and capable of sensitive conversion, and could be re-purposed to alternative uses while retaining their character and heritage interest.

Post-Brexit Agri-Environment Schemes. Both the Council's tenant farmers, and the Council in its own right, are party to agri-environment schemes. These schemes provide funding for habitat management and particular farming practices under Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy. The Estate's tenant farmers can also access an area-based subsidy, funded under Pillar I of the Common Agricultural Policy, called the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS); the Council does not qualify to access this. Once the UK leaves the EU, existing agri-environment and subsidy schemes will be phased out, to be replaced with a new Environmental Land Management system (ELMs) based on the principle of 'public payments for public goods'. This presents a significant opportunity for the Council and its tenant farmers, given the value of public goods and ecosystem services delivered on the Estate. Under proposals outlined in the Agriculture Bill, it is envisaged that farmers and land managers will enter into contractual agreements with the government to undertake certain land management practices for the delivery of ecosystem services, and receive payment as a result. The idea is for these to be straightforward to understand; have a streamlined application process to lower the barriers many farmers faced to participation in past schemes; and minimise bureaucracy to encourage wide participation. Furthermore, it is proposed that ELMs schemes will be open to nearly all land managers who wish to enhance the natural environment, they therefore present an opportunity for additional funding on the land that is managed by the Council.

The Council would work closely with the SDNPA in this: Eastbourne Borough Council is not actually the planning authority for the Estate, SDNPA is. However, there is a duty to co-operate in planning matters, and the delivery of biodiversity net gain on the Estate would be deemed sufficiently local to development within Eastbourne.

The Council is mindful of concerns that this approach to delivering biodiversity net gain could become a 'licence to trash'; in order to allay those concerns, the Council, as planning authority, would ensure strict adherence to the mitigation hierarchy, so that developers are obliged to first of all avoid impacts where possible, then reduce them, then mitigate them, and only as a last resort compensate for them. Irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland, or ancient and veteran trees, remain out of scope of the biodiversity net gain approach, and will continue to be protected by requirements of existing law and policy.

It is important that any compensatory habitat created and/or restored on the Estate will be maintained in the condition necessary to deliver net gains for biodiversity. The government has committed to bringing forward new legislation that would give effect to 'Conservation Covenants' – legally binding obligations that run with the land and commit the landowner to 'positive', proactive management, instead of the purely restrictive or 'negative' covenants that exist in English law today. As we have seen in the Asset Audit above, the Estate is currently subject to restrictive covenants; positive Conservation Covenants could be a powerful 'double lock' to guarantee a net gain legacy over the lifetime of this Plan and beyond.

Whether it is through ELMs, woodland management plans, nature recovery plans or biodiversity net gain strategies, **calcareous grassland should be a focus of restoration efforts**. The extent of calcareous grassland restoration and creation will be informed by emerging habitat network mapping across the Estate, and the priorities identified through the *Changing Chalk* project. The Council appreciates just how valuable this habitat is, being home to an incredibly rich and diverse range of plant and insect life.

In order for chalk grassland to reach a target condition of 'good', Defra guidance on delivering Biodiversity Net Gain suggests 25 years is a

realistic timeframe. The Council is committed to seeing its existing chalk grassland resource reach 'good' condition status over the lifetime of the WEP, and will work with its tenant farmers to target restoration and creation efforts across the let land.



Improving the Visitor Centre offering at Beachy Head. Beachy Head is a major tourist attraction, bringing in hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Estate every year. The Council believes there is a strong argument for a higher profile visitor centre here, fulfilling the following roles:

- Providing visitor information at the point of need
- Inspiring and make people want to visit and stay for longer on the Estate
- Promoting opportunities for understanding

- **Generating funds to support operating costs**
- **Educational and meetings venue**
- **Exhibition space**
- **Hub from which to run guided visitor experiences of the Estate**

A visitor centre could serve as a ‘gateway’ to the Estate and part of a better integrated network of visitor centres across the South Downs National Park. It should function as a place to which visitors (and local people) are drawn in order to understand the Estate and enhance their experience of it. There is potential to deliver a sufficiently high quality of experience to generate visits in its own right, and to be talked about and positively recommended. It presents an opportunity to engage more closely with the public, by connecting visitors with compelling stories of the Estate’s history (economic, social and cultural), the built heritage, natural environment, environmental management and future challenges. To achieve this, the centre would need:

- A strong sense of arrival and good first impressions;
- Distinct qualities, including uniqueness, sense of place, location, reputation;
- A focus on delivering a high-quality customer experience, which is supported by appropriate catering and potentially retail offers;
- High standards of service by customer-focused, on-site staff;
- Regular reinvestment to refresh the visitor experience;
- Emphasis on entertaining the guest through activities, events and animation. As the experience develops there could also be focus on income generation in addition to ‘free’ experiences – for example, cycle hire.

The Council envisages this centre as a ‘hub’ to co-ordinate and provide direction to experiences, activities, and specific offers elsewhere on the Estate. In bringing forward this project, the Council would be able to draw on the expertise of its own officers, and relevant experts within the County Council, who have delivered exhibitions and public programming based on material culture collections.

The Council also recognises that it would make a significant positive difference if appropriate disabled access toilet facilities, such as Changing

Places provision, are included in any development of visitor infrastructure over the medium term.



Improving the educational offering. The visitor centre could provide an education space for school groups, and the educational offer on the wider estate could also be improved. Days out and trips to the Estate could form a key part of the curriculum for Eastbourne schools in particular, as well as schools from further afield with the feasibility of paid-for school visits and ranger led activities being explored. The Estate provides multiple opportunities for learning outside the classroom in the natural environment, which has been shown to deliver improvements for pupils in terms of health and wellbeing, behaviour, attainment, social skills, and connection to nature⁹. More educational packages and courses in the natural environment, including practical environmental conservation work, and ecological, geographical and environmental fieldwork could be

⁹ Natural England Commissioned Report NECR215: Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report

developed. Outdoor learning sessions could help to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, communication and team building skills. Courses could be linked to curriculum delivery in a wide variety of subjects, with knowledge and skills gained practically applied in fieldwork, conservation and construction projects. Learning experiences might range from short, in-school sessions, to structured programmes which could last for a school term. Over the Easter school holidays, May half-term and the summer holidays, a programme of daily ranger activities could be introduced to create an additional reason to visit. These could run for 2 to 4 hours each day, and might include, for example, pond-dipping, bushcrafts and wildlife walks.

Diversification and re-purposing of redundant farm buildings.

Opportunities to re-purpose some of the Estate's built assets could be explored as part of efforts to improve the overall offering to visitors and locals. It is possible to envisage the visitor centre serving as a focal point or hub for an integrated, dispersed visitor experience that includes Black Robin Farm, Crapham Barn and New Barn.

The buildings at Black Robin Farm include Victorian barns, milking parlours and stables that are no longer suitable for modern farming systems and which could potentially be used (subject to planning) to host local artisans, craftspeople, and business start-ups. The Council could work with these third-parties to develop and operate specific elements of the visitor experience - for example, the catering and retail offer. The business case for a farm shop could be explored, which could showcase artisan producers from the local area, and which could be a retail outlet for lamb and beef produced on the Estate. Black Robin could also be the venue for running courses on local and traditional crafts, cooking, arts, wellbeing, history or archaeology. With the closure of Stanmer Park Farm and the Seven Sisters Sheep Centre, there does appear to be an opportunity for a genuine working sheep farm that would continue to manage the land traditionally while providing greater access to the public – both generating income and providing educational benefits.

Crapham Barn and New Barn could form part of this offering, being vernacular buildings of a style that is characteristic of the Estate and the local area. Open-air museums provide a three-dimensional setting for explaining historic way of living or working; Crapham Barn and New Barn

could give context to the techniques, equipment, furnishings, clothes and art of the Victorian period. Although these buildings are not listed, the Council sees them as valuable reminders of those historic farming systems which shaped the Downs, and recognises that they contribute to the special qualities of the Estate. The Council would like to explore ways of stimulating public awareness and interest in the built environment and historic farming practices on the Estate. It might be possible to come to some arrangement with the Weald and Downland museum, whereby some of their resources are utilised to deliver public engagement activities at one of these locations. Alternative uses for these buildings that preserve their special qualities for the future could be considered: this might include venue hire, a facility for events (especially in the low season and involving local communities) and a meeting space for schools and other groups. Energy efficiency and renewable energy systems could be incorporated into any re-purposing programme.

Notwithstanding these ambitions, the Council is mindful that Crapham Barn and New Barn are in exposed settings, and any proposals must be careful not to lose the rural and historic character that makes these locations so special. The associated development which comes with such changes of use, such as car parking, can be difficult to successfully assimilate into such open settings. If space at Black Robin Farm could be used for public engagement, this would enable the Council to deliver some immediate improvements to public engagement and provide a platform for ongoing engagement / testing of learning opportunities to feed into longer-term ambitions.