

Report to **South Downs National Park Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **21 November 2024**
By **Claire Onslow, Commercial & Strategic Manager - Seven Sisters and Claire Kerr, Countryside & Policy Manager - Eastern Downs**
Title of Report **Seven Sisters Country Park Landscape Management Plan 2021-2026: Mid-term plan update**

Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- 1. Receive and consider the progress made to date in delivering the Seven Sisters Country Park Landscape Management Plan 2021-26**
 - 2. Note the updates made to the Seven Sisters Country Park Landscape Management Plan 2021-26** to delivery the requirements **of the Countryside Stewardship Agreement**, as set out in paragraph 4.1.
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I. Introduction

- I.1 The purpose of this report is to provide a midterm update to Members on the progress made in delivering the Seven Sisters Country Park Landscape Management Plan 2021-26.
- I.2 Seven Sisters Country Park was purchased by the South Downs National Park Authority in 2021 and is currently the only landscape within the National Park that is owned by the Authority, which places responsibilities on the Authority to manage this important landscape whilst demonstrating exemplar practices. The custodianship of the landscape of Seven Sisters Country Park is driven by the key principles; Rest, Reset, Adapt and Build Resilience.
- I.3 The SSCP Landscape Management Plan sets the vision and objectives for the landscape across the 280 hectares that make up the Country Park over the next 50 years. It guides management and takes a landscape-led approach.
- I.4 The current Landscape Management Plan 2021 – 2026 will be reviewed after the first five years, in line with the review of the SDNPA Partnership Management Plan.

Policy Context

- I.5 The policy context for the Landscape Management Plan is set through the current South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan 2020-25 (PMP) and Authority's Corporate Plan 2023-25. Delivery at Seven Sisters Country Park contributes towards all 10 PMP Outcomes as well as the Corporate Plan High Level Targets: Nature Recovery, Climate Action and National Park for All.
- I.6 Since the adoption of the Landscape Management Plan the national policy framework has evolved with the enactment of the Environment Act 2021, the publication of the Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 and more recently the publication of the Protected Landscapes Outcomes Framework targets.

1.7 Locally the site is designated as Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which places an obligation on the landowner to ensure the site is appropriately managed for the features for which it is notified, and all appropriate consents are obtained from Natural England. The iconic landscape is also part of the Sussex Heritage Coast and is included in the proposal for the 'Seven Sisters' Super National Nature Reserve (SNNR).

2. Issues for consideration

2.1 The SSCP Landscape Management Plan 2021 – 2026 sets a strategic vision for the park and was produced by a team of expert leads from across the SDNPA during the purchase phase of the site. Since its inception there is now learned experience of operating the site, including resources available and a Countryside Stewardship Agreement has been secured which have evolved how the site will be managed.

2.2 In January 2024, a five-year, Countryside Stewardship Agreement (CSA) with Natural England was confirmed. The agreement comes with annual funding expected to be in the region of £168k pa, alongside additional funding of £117k for management of chalk grassland over an additional 5 years and capital works estimated to be around £32k. The CSA provides a framework for land management but is not an exclusive programme with SDNPA able to progress additional land management practices subject to the necessary permissions and corporate ambitions.

2.3 Since taking ownership of the Country Park significant progress has been made with investment in visitor experience infrastructure and managing the wider landscape. An initial two-year rest period gave time for the landscape to recover from a period of intensive sheep grazing, as well as allowing officers to better understand the needs, requirements and opportunities presented by the landscape whilst investment to visitor infrastructure was undertaken.

2.4 Appendix I provides a detailed overview of authority wide collaboration delivery to date against each objective within the Landscape Management Plan. It should be noted that learned experience from the site, staffing resources and impacts from seasonal climate changes all influence delivery during the last 2.5 years.

2.5 As part of the Landscape Management Plan and Countryside Stewardship delivery a planned monitoring programme is underway. Baseline habitat and species surveys were undertaken for the Countryside Stewardship process and future success will be measured in the medium to long term with an evolving programme of biodiversity monitoring reported in the Corporate Plan HLTs and against specific monitoring for the Countryside Stewardship.

2.6 The Countryside Stewardship Agreement provides a management scheme with deliverables for SSCP for the next 5 years with requirements to manage specific areas in agreement with Natural England e.g. scrub management. This will require the Landscape Management Plan to be amended and reflective of the work being undertaken on the ground.

2.7 Year one of the Countryside Stewardship workplan prioritises the grazing of animals, management and restoration of chalk grassland, management of grassland for wading birds, management of rough grassland for target features and the management of vegetated shingle and coastal saltmarsh. To facilitate the above, significant investment in fencing and water troughs has been required, funded by the agreement along with a new livestock grazing arrangement with a local farmer for cows and sheep, alongside an existing agreement for pony grazing and a longstanding Farm Business Tenancy.

2.8 It is important to note that the Countryside Stewardship Agreement is only part of the obligations of land ownership, alongside Riparian owner duties and additional responsibilities of being an exemplar landowner that SSCP has obligations to fund and fulfil in addition. These include providing car parking and welcome hub facilities at Exceat, managing tenants and holiday accommodation, managing visitor movements and impacts to the landscape, promoting cliff safety, working with partners as part of the Sussex Heritage Coast and proposals for the Super National Nature Reserve.

2.9 A full summary of key achievements in the mid-term review of the Landscape Management Plan can be viewed in Appendix I. However notable highlights are considered to be securing

a funded 5 year Countryside Stewardship Agreement and securing an initial grazing agreements with a local farmer, providing at scale, a supply of cows and sheep to complement existing pong grazing arrangements.

3. Options & cost implications

- 3.1 The dedicated SSCP team of 6 FTEs, includes 1 x FT Ranger with supported resource of the Country Park Manager and Operations Assistant roles delivering landscape conservation. Supported by the Eastern Downs CPM providing strategic context along with practical support from the Ranger team and authority wide collaboration in specific themed areas.
- 3.2 The Countryside Stewardship Agreement is awarded with a funding package estimated to be in the region of £168pa for 5 years, alongside additional funding of £117k for management of chalk grassland over an additional 5 years and specific capital works estimated to be around £32k. This funding is proposed to cover the delivery of a specific programme of works and contributions towards infrastructure works and contractors.
- 3.3 Additional funding opportunities for non-countryside stewardship funded land management programmes will be sought from capital bids or external funding pots for specific projects as identified. Funding opportunities may be realised from partnership working along the Heritage Coast eg SNNR.

4. Next steps

- 4.1 To continue to implement the Landscape Management Plan actions, with noted amendments in line with the Countryside Stewardship Agreement. Updates are required to the three objectives highlighted below to be reflective of the work being undertaken on the ground.

Objective	Amendment	Narrative
Habitats: Improved or semi-improved grassland	Continue to graze semi-improved grassland, rather than create a mosaic of scrub and grassland	Due to levels of scrub elsewhere at SSCP and adjoining land.
Habitats: Improved or semi-improved grassland	Countryside Stewardship does not include any plans for hay meadow management	Not a priority until after 2029, and then to be negotiated with NE for future agreements.
Habitats: Scrub	Seek to graze more areas than reintroduce scrub to create a mosaic of scrub and grassland	Due to levels of scrub elsewhere at SSCP and adjoining land.

- 4.2 An ongoing programme of both externally commissioned and in house monitoring and data collection will measure success in the medium and longer term for nature recovery, climate change and visitor experience alongside specific monitoring for the Countryside Stewardship Agreement.
- 4.3 In addition to the Countryside Stewardship programmed funding; further opportunities for associated land management and interventions will be sought as part costed project capital bids or external funding pots for specific projects as identified.
- 4.4 The ‘Seven Sisters’ Super National Nature Reserve presents a future opportunity for collaboration on a landscape scale. The process has already been brought to Members and the NPA has supported SDNPA becoming an Approved Body for the inclusion of land at SSCP within the SNNR as well as supporting the wider principle. [National Park Authority Meeting 28 March 2024 - South Downs National Park Authority](#) (Agenda item 10). The Natural England timetable aims for declaration in January 2026.

- 4.5 A full Landscape Management Plan review will be undertaken in 2026, after the completion of the South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan, taking into account the 5-year Countryside Stewardship Agreement.

5. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	The Countryside Stewardship Agreement is awarded with a five-year funded budget and responsibilities to deliver against an agreed programme of works. Additional landscape management interventions may be required outside of the Countryside Stewardship and funding will be sought for additional staffing resources and projects on a case-by-case basis as part of the corporate processes.
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	The Countryside Stewardship Agreement provides a five-year funded programme to the estimated value of c£900k. Procurement processes for contracting any works will be carried out to obtain value for money.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	Landscape & Natural Beauty Increasing Resilience Habitats and Species Arts & Heritage Outstanding Experiences Lifelong Learning
Links to other projects or partner organisations	Delivery of the Landscape Management Plan is working in partnership with Natural England.
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	Managing the landscape at SSCP, supported by the Countryside Stewardship contributes to SDNPA objectives towards Nature Recovery and Climate Change
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	Managing SSCP and delivering the LMP provides opportunities for a wide range of engagement opportunities to deliver social value from volunteering, education and outreach to wider countryside access for all and inclusion outcomes for both managing the landscape to visitor experience.
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Managing SSCP provides opportunities for countryside access for all, diversity engagement and inclusion outcomes for both managing the landscape to visitor experience.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	No

Implication	Yes*/No
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	No
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	Yes. Managing SSCP places responsibilities on SDNPA to ensure appropriate Health & Safety compliance and risk management are completed across all countryside management and visitor experience activities
Are there any Data Protection implications?	Any data arising from the management of SSCP will be in managed in accordance with SDNPA Data Protection policies.

6. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Failure to deliver Countryside Stewardship Agreement outcomes comes with financial penalties	Low	High	Dedicated SSCP team and wider management overview to ensure resources are allocated to the annual delivery against funded programme outcomes and regular liaison with Natural England.
As the only land currently owned by SDNPA, SSCP needs to be an exemplar of land management practises to avoid reputational risk	Low	High	Appropriately resourced SSCP team, supported by Authority wide collaboration to deliver the Countryside Stewardship Agreement and to demonstrate best land management practices.

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Appendices

I. SSCP Landscape Management Plan Mid Term Delivery Review

SDNPA Consultees

Chief Executive; Director of Landscape and Strategy

External Consultees

None

Background Documents

[Seven Sisters Landscape Management Plan 2021 - 2026](#)

[SSCP Grazing Compartments](#)

