

Report to **Policy & Resources Committee**
Date **20 February 2025**
By **Commercial & Strategic Manager – Seven Sisters**
Title of Report **Q3 Seven Sisters Country Park Performance Report 2024/25**

Note

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

I. Receive and consider the Q3 Seven Sisters Country Park performance report 2024/25

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 2024/25, 1 October to 31 December.
- I.2 The committee will be aware that the operating agreement under which South Downs Commercial Operations Limited (SDCOL) operated SSCP terminated on 9 October 2024. As such, the KPIs that had been previously reported to the committee fell away as they formed part of the operating agreement with SDCOL. New KPIs on the performance and delivery at SSCP will come to the National Park Authority for approval alongside the 2025/26 operating plan at its meeting in March 2025, after which those new KPIs will be monitored by the P&R Committee.

2. Update on performance

- 2.1 At Q3 SSCP has performed well in the delivery of the SSCP Business Plan. These include the following highlights:
- Monthly car park compliance checks reporting an average of 87% compliance in Q3, being slightly below our 90% target. This is attributed to a more regional, seasonal audience using the park differently and not displaying permits / tickets correctly.
 - Q3, is a quieter trading period for visitor facilities. Food & Beverage report an average spend per transaction of £5.59 which is consistent with the offer available and 12% above budget. After a very positive summer season year to date (YTD) performance is c.10% up on budget as we enter the typically quieter Q4 trading period.
 - The Visitor Centre reported an increased average spend per transaction of £12.12 with a notable shift in purchasing trends towards gifts rather than souvenirs and 24% above budget. After a very positive summer season YTD performance is c.39% up on budget as the Visitor Centre has performed exceptionally well and 2025/26 will be adjusted to reflect this. Q4 is typically a difficult trading period.
 - Average spend per head in the Visitor Centre continues to perform over target, despite the impact of adverse weather. Spend per head can only be tracked in the Visitor Centre

and it should be noted that not all visitors will make a purchase alongside the free information service, so the reported average spend per transaction is considered a more meaningful measure.

- Two Corporate Volunteering opportunities were hosted for AMEX and Giff Gaff, where teams supported the rangers with scrub and grassland clearance. Typically, the demand for Corporate Volunteering during autumn / winter months is lower.
- The contract awarded to Cuckmere Cottages & Camping to manage the self-catering cottages and camping facilities commenced in May 2024, with operations starting in June, so the reporting periods do not align. For the period June – October an average combined occupancy of 41% was recorded for the 3 cottages, which is considered positive given a late start into the season and a new product. All cottages were fully booked over the Christmas period with positive signs for future bookings.
- Bookings for the Camping Barn and Field were limited to groups for the first year with an occupancy of 12% reported. However, bookings for 2025 are on the increase as many groups plan a year in advance and opportunities had been missed for 2024.
- Feedback for both the camping facilities and self-catering cottages has been extremely positive, and the quirks and logistics of the site are now understood. The site was closed in November for annual maintenance as per the contract.
- It was an unusually quiet Q3 for filming on the park with only one permit granted, bringing total occasions to 19 YTD. Liaison with Sussex Film Office confirmed that it had been difficult period for the industry.
- 2 inhouse events hosted in Q3, a free half term 'spooky' trail alongside self-led craft activities, and the third annual Christmas Fair event with over 35 stalls between the Pump Barn, Visitor Centre and neighbouring Saltmarsh Farmhouse. Despite wind weather warnings, it was a very well attended event with audiences increasing year on year and stallholder feedback included that it been an important part of their calendar.
- In addition, private hires for a range of groups including education, Cuckmere Valley Climate Action Group, alongside free, inhouse hosting including the National Parks Access Group, SNPS Study tour, and supporting the wellbeing team with Sanctuary Café and other groups.
- During Q3, the mobility scooters were hired for 35 sessions, with a notable increase in local, repeat visitors thrilled to be able to access and engage with the country park. Unseasonably warm weather supported the regular use of the scooters in this period.
- 7 landscape volunteering opportunities took place in Q3 including Youth Action Days, South Down Volunteer sessions and work experience opportunities recording 32 hours of work including scything and scrub clearance.
- Two regular visitor experience volunteers have been engaged with a passion for weekly litter picking along the concrete path and main visitor routes.
- The programmed wetland enhancement work was completed, creating new scrapes, regrading meander edges and deepening ditches to improve conditions for wetland birds, and the creation of a new, third dew pond in the dry valley improving habitat connectivity.
- Investment in infrastructure which includes fencing and trough connectivity to ensure safe grazing funded by Countryside Stewardship and the replacement of gates along the South Downs Way funded by Access / SDW funds.
- The sewage treatment plant was completed and commissioned, and native hedgerow will be planted in Q4 to establish new habitats.
- Autumn / winter grazing continued with 300 sheep, 80 cows and 25 ponies rotating across the site for peak grazing season in preparation for the spring.

3. 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 SSCP 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 how it's 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 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

4. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

- 4.1 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	None
SDNPA Consultees	Director of Planning; Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	None