

From: **Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services**

**Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director, Growth, Environment and Transport**

To: **Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee**

Subject: **Country Parks – Renewal of the Kent Country Parks Strategy**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

**Past Pathway of Paper:** n/a

**Future Pathway of Paper:** n/a

**Electoral Division:** County-wide

**Summary:** Kent County Council (KCC) owns and manages a portfolio of country parks and countryside sites across the county. These parks and greenspaces offer some of the highest quality habitats and landscapes that Kent has to offer. In 2020 they played host to approximately 1.3 million visits from dog-walkers, families, joggers and many others.

This paper sets the context for extending the existing strategy by one year to allow for customer insight to be gathered prior to the production of a new draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy in the Autumn of 2021. The draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy will be returned to Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee in the Autumn of 2021 to ask Members of the Committee for their comments ahead of a planned public consultation in the Winter of 2021.

**Recommendation(s):**

- 1) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed one-year extension to the 2017-2021 Kent Country Parks Strategy (attached)
- 2) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed activity and consultation process contained within section 2 of this report that will inform the production of the draft 2022-2027 Kent Country Parks Strategy

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The KCC Country Parks service owns and manages a portfolio of country parks and countryside sites across the county.
- 1.2 During the period of the last strategy (2017-2021) the service has achieved a number of the planned strategic outcomes and some of these include:
  - i. *Ensuring high quality parks are provided, maintained and improved and that, where possible, the quality of standards of management are independently tested and verified.* This is evidenced by the Green Flag

awards that seven of the parks achieve annually and the annual South and South East in Bloom awards in which either Shorne Woods or Brockhill Country Parks have won the Country Park of the Year title for the last four years consecutively.

- ii. *Working with nurseries, schools, colleges and adult education providers to provide opportunities to increase awareness, enjoyment and engagement with the environment.* The total number of children undertaking an education visit to one of the country parks was 7,420 in 19/20 and this was combined with 121 adult learners undertaking a training course or qualification with the service helping to teach and support the next generation of forest school leaders whilst fostering a love of the environment with the young people of Kent.
- iii. *Increasing visitor numbers outside of peak times.* Since 2017 when visitor numbers began to be accurately and consistently measured the service has seen an increase in the number of visits across the portfolio. In 2019 there were an additional 250,000 visits to Country Parks sites compared to the start of the current strategy period in 2017. The impact of COVID-19 on communities has been especially apparent in the last 12 months where the service has seen a total increase in visitor visits of 23% compared to 2019 with some individual sites seeing their visitor numbers increase by 228% as local communities seek to use their local park for leisure and exercise. Compared to 2019 43% of these additional visits in 2020 have taken place in the off-peak winter months.
- iv. *Providing high quality volunteering opportunities.* The service has increased its volunteering opportunities by creating two new volunteer groups to add to the three that were already in existence. This contributed 7591 volunteer hours to the service during 19/20.
- v. *Increasing the percentage of the service's budget generated from on-site income generation activities.* In 2019/20 the service generated income in excess of £1.35 million through cafes, car parking, venue hire, events and school visits. This equates to 76% of the Country Parks direct costs, up from 40% self-funding in 2008-09, following a programme of continuous improvement and a focus on financial sustainability.
- vi. The service has also established and built its digital presence on social media through the use of Facebook accounts and through the development of an online booking system that enables customers to interact with the service on an increasingly digital platform. In 19/20 a total of 2919 tickets for events were purchased online, along with 90 bookings for children's birthday parties and 155 venue hire or corporate team building events. The Facebook pages average 2500 views per post and the interactions and page views are increasing all the time.
- vii. The service has successfully negotiated a Service Level Agreement with KCC Infrastructure that has seen three Countryside Sites previously transferred to the Estates team return to the portfolio with relevant funding for management. This has enabled the service to improve and maintain the sites to the high standards the service demands in line with their environmental potential whilst also delivering savings to KCC. The

management fees are now lower than when external contractors were delivering the site management, and the service has added value as visitors receive improved customer service and visitor experiences when using the sites due to daily visits from the Ranger team. New maps and signage are being provided together with bench and fence replacement and the development of a long-term management plan to support the environmental recovery of the sites.

- 1.3 Alongside this the service has, in part, met a series of challenging financial targets. The full achievement of these has been hampered by the restrictions on service delivery that have been observed over the past year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite these budget pressures, the Country Parks team has maintained exceptional customer satisfaction ratings - an average 9.25 out of 10 for overall satisfaction was achieved in the last visitor survey in 2016 - and have ensured that the parks are managed to a high industry standard.
- 1.4 Notably absent from the service activity since 2020 has been the necessary work to plan and research changes in visitor needs and wants. This has been impossible as the service responded to the ever-changing government guidelines to ensure the continued operation and availability of the portfolio for use by the public during the pandemic. This has been combined with an unprecedented increase in visitor numbers across the portfolio as the communities of Kent sought the health and wellbeing benefits of their local greenspace both for their exercise needs and for safe outdoor spaces to meet with friends and family, to walk their dogs or just to escape the confines of their homes for a short time. An agreement to extend the current strategy by one year will allow the service time to reflect on the changing demands and needs of their customer base, to explore the opportunities that we now have from this wider customer base and to analyse customer feedback and behaviour to ensure that the future focus of the parks service will continue to evolve and meet the new challenges which greenspace will face as we recover from the Covid-19 crisis. This will be framed alongside continued focus on the environmental recovery during the interim one-year strategic plan.
- 1.5 The draft 2022-2027 Strategy will be developed in conjunction with an Informal Member Working Group which will be chaired by Sarah Hohler, Deputy Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services. The first meeting of the working group is expected to take place in June 2021.

## **2.0 Proposed Activity and Consultation process**

- 2.1 Following consideration by members of this Committee, the next stage of the development of the strategy is to conduct a visitor survey to ascertain the thoughts and views of both users and non-users of the Kent Country Parks and Countryside sites. The last visitor survey was conducted in 2016. Since then, the visitor numbers have increased across the portfolio and three Countryside sites have returned to the portfolio as mentioned above. The service is keen to ensure that the views of these new users are included in the development of the new strategy alongside existing repeat users to ensure we continue to meet the changing needs of our visitor base.

2.2 It is proposed that this survey will take place throughout June, July and August of 2021 and will include the following elements:

- i An online visitor survey to include targeted invitations to both existing park users through our customer management database and the local communities to the individual parks through our local community networks to seek views of both users and non-users.
- ii Face to face deep dive surveys at the Country Parks during peak visitor times to capture more specific views of users.
- iii Discussion at or by the individual parks' Liaison Groups; and
- iv Staff and volunteer surveys to seek input and engagement of both the professional and non-professional work force.
- v Informal interviews with local Members whose divisions our parks and countryside sites are into seek the representative views of local residents where appropriate.

2.3 Following the survey period a full evaluation and analysis will take place to inform the production of the draft 2022-2027 strategy which will be informed by the Informal Members Working Group, the individual Parks Liaison Groups<sup>1\*</sup> and any other groups or individuals identified during the survey period.

2.4 The draft 2022-2027 strategy will be returned to Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee in the Autumn of 2021 for discussion and endorsement prior to public consultation.

2.5 Subject to endorsement by the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee, a public consultation on the draft 2022-2027 strategy is planned for a 10-week period across November 2021, December 2021 and January 2022, to ensure that visitors to the parks, both in and outside of the school holiday period, have an opportunity to respond.

2.6 It is anticipated the consultation will focus on a set of substantive questions that will be developed through the Member Working Group prior to being communicated and agreed with members in the Autumn of 2021.

2.7 We will also ask for basic demographic data about the respondents, as well as whether or not they are regular park users and if so, which is their regular park. This will enable us to analyse the responses by users and non-users, and by park where appropriate.

2.8 The responses to the public consultation will be analysed and a Consultation Report produced and shared with Members to outline the feedback received. This feedback will be used to inform and update where necessary the draft

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The Individual Parks Liaison Groups seek to bring together strategic partners, neighbouring landowners, representatives from identified user groups and other interested parties to inform the management of the individual parks and to provide opportunities for communication and engagement with these important stakeholders.

2022-27 strategy, with the intention that a full and final version will be presented to Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee in March of 2022 ready for adoption in April 2022.

- 2.9 An Equality Impact Assessment and Data Protection Impact Assessment Screening will be completed at the outset of the strategy development and will be referenced and updated as required during the lifetime of the strategy development work. The draft and final version(s) will be included in the presentations to Members as appropriate.

### **3. Policy Framework**

- 3.1 As well as being intrinsically important sites for biodiversity and heritage, the parks make a significant contribution to wider outcomes important to Kent County Council. For example, the parks contribute to a wide range of KCC Strategic and Supporting Outcomes, including those in 'Setting the Course' the current interim strategic plan as follows;

#### **Financial challenge**

- Contribute to delivering a balanced budget by increasing the commercial opportunities at the parks to bring in more income and also by offsetting costs by delivery better value for money than external greenspace contract arrangements.
- Continuing to use technology to improve efficiency both by expanding the online booking system to include school and education bookings and by offering online interactions with the service where this is most appropriate.

#### **Seizing the Opportunities**

- Making the most of the increased and diverse customer base and ensuring that the strategic direction of the service is tailored to the commercial and environmental opportunities that our visitors need and want.
- Expanding on the partnership working arrangements that have been solidified during the pandemic arrangements to establish a more coherent approach to greenspace management with other local landowners and stakeholders.

#### **Delivering Change**

- Managing the competing demand for access to and use of the parks and countryside sites throughout the seasons alongside the need for environmental protection and good management.
  - Offering new opportunities for employment and training to Kent residents that better reflect the work that we will be undertaking.
- 3.2 In addition, the work contributes to the outcomes identified in the Kent Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (extended to 2021) including;
- Every child has the best start in life.
  - Effective prevention of ill health by people taking greater responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

- The quality of life for people with long term conditions is enhanced and they have access to good quality care and support.
- People with mental health issues are supported to live well.
- People with dementia are assessed and treated earlier and supported to live well.

### 3.3 Finally, the Strategy also fundamentally contributes to the Kent Environment Strategy;

- Conserve and enhance the quality and supply of Kent's natural resources and assets.

## 4. Financial Implications

4.1 The service is committed to being as financially self-sustaining as possible, and the service will continue to be managed in accordance with Directorate spending plans. The current revenue budget for the service for 20/21 is £1.8 million alongside a rolling capital budget of £63,000 per annum.

## 5. Conclusion

5.1 The Kent Country Parks service has successfully met a number of the aims set out in the current 2017-2021 strategy. However, the impact of national restrictions over the past year has both hampered the full realisation of the strategic and commercial aims and increased the number of visitors across the year including at off-peak times. In order to ensure that the next strategic vision for the service takes stock of and responds to the needs of the changing visitor base and seeks to provide the service and facilities that our local communities want members are asked to approve the two key recommendations.

## 6. Recommendation(s)

1) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed one-year extension to the 2017-2021 Kent Country Parks Strategy

2) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed activity and consultation process contained within section 2 of this report that will inform the production of the draft 2022-2027 Kent Country Parks strategy

## 6. Background Documents

6.1 The following documents are attached to this paper: The 2017-2021 County Parks Strategy

## 7. Contact details

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