

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

Simon Jones, Corporate Director, Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 22 March 2022

Decision No: N/A

Subject: Public Consultation on the draft Country Parks Strategy 2022-2027

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Report: N/A

Future Pathway of Paper: N/A

Electoral Division: County-wide

Summary: Kent County Council owns and manages a portfolio of country parks and countryside sites. These parks offer some of the best habitats and landscapes that Kent has to offer, and in 2021 played host to approximately 1.6 million visitors.

This paper sets the context for the accompanying draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy and asks Members of the Committee for their comments ahead of a planned public consultation in the Spring of 2022.

Recommendation(s):

- 1) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and make recommendations to the Cabinet Member on the content of the draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy vision, aims and objectives (Section 3 of this report).
- 2) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed consultation process contained within section 4 of this report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Kent County Council Country Parks Service owns and manages a portfolio of nine country parks and manages a further three countryside sites through a Service Level Agreement with the Infrastructure Division.
- 1.2 In 2019/20 the service generated over £1.35 million income through cafes, car parking, venue hire, public events, and school visits. This equates to 76% of the direct running costs of the service through the designated Country Parks budget. Through continuous improvement of playgrounds and

facilities, commercial development generating increased income from paid for services such as education services, cafes, and car-parking fees, alongside a clear focus on sustainability, this figure has grown from 40% since 2008/09.

1.3 The service was hugely affected by the global pandemic with significant changes to business-as-usual activity required to ensure that the public were safely able to continue to access the greenspace and, where possible, the basic facilities such as toilets, within the parameters of government guidelines. This was coupled with unprecedented numbers of visitors using the sites for exercise, recreation and to support their physical and mental health when other facilities in Kent remained closed or had access restrictions. On top of this, income generating services were closed and/or had capacity capped to ensure continued public safety.

1.4 In contrast, over the past 9-12 months there have been some notable additional achievements:

- The opening of the first Changing Places toilet facility for adults with additional needs at Shorne Woods Country Park. This was externally funded by the Interreg EXPERIENCE project and securing plans and funding for two further facilities in 2022.
- Two successful bids to the Public Health Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) providing:
 - £400k to undertake maintenance and improvement to the park infrastructure; and
 - £1.1M to refurbish and update playgrounds to improve accessibility.
- £53k funding from the Department for Transport to provide habitat and infrastructure improvements at Pegwell Bay Country Park

2. Policy Framework

2.1 As well as being intrinsically important sites for biodiversity and heritage, the country parks make a significant contribution to wider outcomes important to Kent County Council, including those in 'Setting the Course' the current interim strategic plan as follows;

Financial challenge

- Contributing to delivering a balanced budget by increasing the commercial opportunities at the parks to bring in more income and also by offsetting costs by delivering 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 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.

2.2 Contributing 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.

2.3 Finally, fully contributing to the Kent Environment Strategy;

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

3. The Development of the draft Country Parks Strategy 2022-27

- 3.1 An updated visitor survey was carried out in the summer of 2021 with a target to generate 1,000 overall responses with 25 of these to come from non-park users. The survey received total of 1,724 responses, 639 of these were online responses and 1,085 were in surveys. 177 responses were from non-

park users. The results of the survey indicated that despite the unprecedented challenges the Country Parks Service has maintained exceptional customer satisfaction ratings at an average of 9 out of 10.

3.2 Given that the service has performed well financially, that customer experience has remained strong and biodiversity management has improved over the period of the last strategy the draft 2022-2027 strategy seeks to build upon these strengths with the key aspects being:

- Increased connectivity, both through physical links to other land and through partnership working.
- Better accessibility, the provision of inclusive greenspace and facilities and equity of access across Kent.
- Maintained commerciality and the move towards sustaining visitor numbers and maximising income from those visitors through efficient services alongside securing external funding.
- Increasing the education provision to include a focus on sustainability and responses to climate change as well as engagement with the natural environment for both adults and young people.

3.3 The draft strategy has been developed in partnership with an Informal Member Working Group. The Group was chaired by the Deputy Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services, Sarah Hohler, and included Neil Baker, Tom Cannon and Mark Hood.

3.4 The draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy sets out the following vision, aims and objectives for the service:

3.5 The vision is *“to provide an inspirational, accessible and sustainable countryside experience for Kent’s residents and visitors”*

3.6 This vision is supported by three strategic aims:

3.6.1 Provide a country park network of well-connected high quality and biodiverse greenspace across Kent.

3.6.2 Sustain and manage visitor numbers to our country parks by always providing a quality customer experience alongside a comprehensive environmental education service, facilities, events, and activities that encourage increased or repeat visits, especially amongst under-represented groups.

3.6.3 Consolidate the financial sustainability of the Country Parks through maximising self-financing and external funding.

- 3.7 These strategic aims will be delivered through eleven objectives:
- 3.7.1 Provide high quality parks that are maintained and improved in line with our management plans, statutory and grant obligations, and that, where possible, the standards of our management are independently tested and verified.
 - 3.7.2 Ensure our country parks are well connected through physical networks and collaborative partnerships to enable the best results for people, nature, and the environment.
 - 3.7.3 Maintain or, where possible, enhance the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of the sites ensuring that opportunities to connect communities to their value are provided.
 - 3.7.4 Support the achievement of the outcomes of the Kent Environment Strategy, the Kent Biodiversity Strategy, and the Kent Nature Recovery Strategy.
 - 3.7.5 Increase the accessibility of the countryside through the deployment of landscape management techniques, effective outward looking partnership working and improved facilities that seek to provide equity of access to quality greenspace to all Kent residents and visitors.
 - 3.7.6 Work with nurseries, schools, further education establishments and adults to provide environmental education and events that promote engagement with the natural world alongside supporting future sustainability and responses to the climate emergency.
 - 3.7.7 Provide and increase high quality volunteering opportunities including seeking new ways for communities to volunteer their time to the work of the country parks.
 - 3.7.8 Maximise the ability of country parks to meet the health and well-being needs of communities and contribute to good quality of life through strong cross partnership working with physical and mental health care providers.
 - 3.7.9 Maximise the opportunities to generate income on the sites through catering, education, events and innovative paid for facilities and services whilst operating at maximum efficiency.
 - 3.7.10 Explore, develop, and secure external funding opportunities that complement the work of the country parks.
 - 3.7.11 Provide the ability for all to enjoy regardless of their age, health, race, religion, disability, or gender and that our management supports equality, environmental protection, and the achievement of our strategic aims at all times.

4. Proposed consultation process

4.1 Following consideration by Members of this Committee, the next stage of the development of the strategy is to consult with stakeholders, partners, and the public.

4.2 It is proposed that this consultation will include the following elements:

- i. An online questionnaire and direct comment and suggestion opportunity utilising the Let's Talk Kent public engagement platform;
- ii. Discussion at, or by, the individual parks' Liaison Groups; and
- iii. Printed material at all parks and countryside sites highlighting the draft strategy consultation and ways to respond.

4.3 The consultation is planned for a 10-week period across April, May, and June 2022, to ensure that visitors to the parks, both in and outside of the school holiday periods, have an opportunity to respond.

4.4 The consultation will focus on a set of substantive questions that will enable respondents to provide feedback on the proposed Country Parks strategy and its supporting aims and objectives.

4.5 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.

4.6 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 2022-27 strategy, with the intention that a full and final version will be presented to the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee ahead of its proposed adoption in Autumn 2022.

4.7 An Equality Impact Assessment and Data Protection Impact Assessment Screening has been completed at the outset of the strategy development and this will be referenced and updated as required before the public consultation is launched and during the lifetime of the strategy development work. The draft and final version(s) will be included in the final presentations to Members as appropriate.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 During the period of the last strategy (2017-2021) the service has met all of its challenging financial targets including an increased income revenue return to support an invest to save bid. Alongside achievement of the targets the service has returned a small surplus to the corporate budget each year, apart from 2020-2021 when Covid-19 restrictions drastically affected the income generating ability of the service to be able to return a surplus over and above the income targets that were met. The income target for the Country Parks service for 2021/22 is £1.4m and current monitoring indicates that this will again be exceeded and a surplus returned indicating a return to business as usual for the service.

5.2 There are no new financial implications contained within the draft strategy; the service will continue to be managed in accordance with existing Directorate spending plans.

6. Recommendation(s)

1) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and make recommendations to the Cabinet Member on the contents of the draft 2022-2027 Country Parks Strategy vision, aims and objectives (Section 3 of this report).

2) The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the proposed consultation process contained within section 4 of this report.

7. Background Documents

7.1 The following documents are attached to this paper;

- a. The draft 2022-2027 County Parks Strategy vision, aims and objectives.
- b. An Equality Impact Assessment of the draft Country Parks Strategy

8. Contact details

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