

Kent Country Parks

strategy

2017-2021



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1 Foreword

Kent County Council (KCC) is privileged to own and manage a range of country parks and countryside sites which contain some of the highest quality natural habitats and landscapes that Kent has to offer. This four year strategy sets out how we intend to protect and manage these natural environments at the same time as providing high quality opportunities for individuals, families and communities to play, learn and relax in these environments.

Every day, our parks are home to:

- Walkers keeping fit in all weathers
- Children learning to engage with nature
- Families relishing spending quality time together
- Runners delighting in the landscape
- Horse riders and cyclists savouring the traffic free rides
- Local businesses blue sky thinking in our meeting rooms
- People enjoying the peace and tranquillity
- A wide variety of plants and wildlife

Over the period of the last strategy (2014-17), KCC's Country Parks team have maintained high customer satisfaction ratings and achieved Green Flag awards for seven of our parks, despite unprecedented budget pressures. We have been able to reduce our demand on Kent residents' council tax by increasing the amount of income we raise in the parks through high quality cafes, birthday parties for youngsters, car parking charges, the production and sale of coppiced timber, and other innovative schemes. All the money spent in the parks, is reinvested directly back into the parks.

We are proud of our country parks, and we are equally proud of the difference they have made to individuals and communities across Kent in recent years. The financial pressures are not likely to diminish in 2017 - 2021, but neither will our commitment to continue to provide inspirational parks for all to enjoy.



2 Highlights so far

The years covered by the last strategy (2014-2017) have seen a lot of amazing things happen in our parks; here are some of the highlights:

- In March 2017 Lullingstone was host to its 100th park run. Many of our sites hold park runs every weekend and runners cover over 100,000km every year!
- We have built and opened new outdoor classrooms at Brockhill and Lullingstone.
- Many of our sites now use animals to help manage the land, from goats at Lullingstone to cattle at Pegwell Bay.
- The team has gone the extra mile to make visits memorable, which has even include dressing up as the Easter Bunny and donning drinks cans costumes to encourage recycling
- Shorne Woods was the first park to get Trampers to help people with limited mobility to access our parks. They have proven so popular we have now introduced them in Lullingstone too.
- The Cabinet Member for Country Parks and the Country Parks team were invited to Westminster to discuss our thoughts about the future of British parks with a Parliamentary select committee.
- Seven of our parks gain and retain Green Flag awards annually
- Our parks welcomed approximately 4.5 million visitors over the three year period
- We installed a number of new play areas, each of them designed with local primary schools
- The parks benefited from approximately 29,000 hours of volunteers' time, volunteers who are as passionate about their local country parks as we are.



3 Vision and strategic aims

Our vision for the KCC Country Parks service is

“to provide an inspirational and sustainable countryside experience for Kent’s residents and visitors”

This vision is supported by three strategic aims:

- 1** Provide a network of high quality and biodiverse country parks
- 2** Increase visitor numbers to the country parks particularly at off peak times and among under-represented groups
- 3** Ensure the service is as financially self-sustaining as possible.



4 Strategic aim 1 - Providing a network of high quality and biodiverse country parks

The Country Parks service currently manages nine principal country parks:

- Shorne Woods
- Lullingstone Country Park
- Teston Bridge Country Park
- Trosley Country Park
- Manor Park Country Park
- Brockhill Country Park
- Pegwell Bay Country Park
- Grove Ferry Picnic Site
- White Horse Wood



Detailed descriptions, photographs, management plans of, and directions to, these parks can be found at www.kent.gov.uk/countryparks

In addition, the Country Parks service also work in partnership with five smaller countryside sites.

- The Larches
- Preston Hill
- Parkwood
- Bluebell Hill
- Dry Hill



To provide a network of high quality country parks, we will deliver the following objectives between 2017 and 2021:

Objective 1: Ensure high quality parks are provided, maintained and improved and that, where possible, the quality of our standards of management are independently tested and verified

We will work to ensure that the parks and the visitor facilities are maintained to the highest possible standards. Currently seven of our parks have achieved the Green Flag Award and we will look to retain and add to these awards.

Objective 2: Ensure that the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of the sites are maintained or enhanced

KCC's country parks include examples of Kent's richest natural heritage, with sites of high biodiversity value, sites within the special landscape of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), as well as sites containing Scheduled Monuments.

Of the nine principal parks, one is a National Nature Reserve (and adjacent to internationally important sites), three contain significant areas of land designated by Natural England as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and three are Local Wildlife Sites. The parks include a selection of some of the highest quality habitats in Kent. The Country Parks team aims to improve visitors' understanding of the landscape and biodiversity of our sites and carry out appropriate management to conserve and enhance this value further. All principal sites have management plans which consider landscape and biodiversity alongside visitor management, access and our parks' local communities.



Objective 3: Support Kent's Environment Strategy

Through the Kent Environment Strategy, Kent County Council is working with partners to protect and enhance our natural and historic environment at the same time as promoting economic growth. The parks will continue to play their part in the collection of Kent's natural resources and assets and we will use our parks to further the objectives of the Kent Environment Strategy.

<http://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/environment-waste-and-planning-policies/environmental-policies/kent-environment-strategy>



5 Strategic aim 2 - Increasing visitor numbers to the country parks particularly at off peak times and among under-represented groups

We are confident about the benefits that our parks bring to individuals and communities. There were approximately 1.6 million visits to the country parks in 2015/16, and on average our visitors rated those visits as 9.25 out of 10 (Source - 2016 Visitor Survey). Over the next four years, we would like to increase the numbers of visitors to the country parks and to do that we will achieve the following objectives:

Objective 4: Work with nurseries, schools, colleges and adult education providers to provide opportunities to increase awareness, enjoyment and engagement with the environment.

Parks are a great place for children, indeed people of all ages, to learn about the world around them, to grow their confidence and develop skills to help them in the wider world. In doing so, we want to grow our already impressive education and volunteering offer with more school visits, a greater number of further education students training and developing vocational skills and playing host to more adult education classes.

Objective 5: Work with Public Health, Clinical Commissioning Groups, and NHS providers to ensure the parks maximise their potential to improve health, well-being and quality of life.

The physical and mental health benefits of simply being in a park are becoming increasingly well understood. According to NHS Choices physical activity can reduce your risk of heart diseases such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50%. The mental health charity Mind say that it can also reduce anxiety and depression and increase self esteem. So we will work with health partners to promote and develop health initiatives in the parks.

Objective 6: Ensure that the parks are enjoyed by all sectors of the community, regardless of age, health, race, religion, disability or gender.

We will undertake research to understand who uses our parks and then take appropriate action to ensure that visitors to our parks reflect the diverse population of Kent.



Objective 7: Increase visitor numbers outside of peak times.

On a sunny bank holiday in August, our parks are already full with people enjoying all that they have to offer; on a damp and gloomy Tuesday in February it is a very different story! While we understand that there will always be a seasonal element to visitor numbers, we will do what we can to encourage visitors outside of peak times. This will include ensuring that we make best

possible use of social media and other communication methods to inspire individuals and families to visit us, as well as reviewing public transport options like bus routes to ensure that people can get to the parks. Our cafes will always be there with a warm mug of coffee to protect against the elements too!

Objective 8: Provide high quality volunteering opportunities

Our parks already benefit from the thousands of hours of hard work and dedication from our volunteers every year. We really value their input so we will continue to develop our volunteering programmes and ensure that we provide an enjoyable and rewarding experience to those people who generously give us their time in a wide variety of roles.



6 Strategic aim 3 - Ensuring the service is as financially self-sustaining as possible

Kent County Council continues to face a range of financial pressures. To ensure we can continue to provide high quality parks and the outcomes they deliver, we will pursue the following objectives over the next four years:

Objective 9: Increase the percentage of the service's budget generated from income generation activities.

The service now generates over £1.2million a year through areas such as room hire, cafes, team building, and school visits. In 2016/17 this equated to approximately 74% of the total Country Parks budget. This already makes it one of the most efficient country park teams in England, but we will work to become even more financially sustainable, including generating further income from the parks and seeking external grant funding where possible.

Objective 10: Ensure the portfolio of country parks and countryside sites is managed to maximise the delivery of our strategic aims

Some of our sites have more potential than others to deliver a quality country parks experience, deliver health outcomes, increase visitor numbers, and generate income. For example some of the smaller sites don't have a car park or basic visitor facilities such as toilets. This doesn't reduce their local importance but we feel that they may benefit from being managed by local community organisations or wildlife charities.

Therefore we will consider alternative management arrangements for some of our smaller countryside sites with any changes to management arrangements dependent on securing appropriate safeguards regarding land management standards and continued public access to these valued community assets. Any proposal would also be subject to public consultation



7 Delivery and performance management

This strategy will be delivered by the country parks team who will work in partnership with other parts of KCC, external stakeholders and local volunteers to achieve the vision, aims and objectives.



In order to ensure we know whether we are making progress, we will monitor the following indicators:

- Visitor numbers
- Visitor satisfaction ratings
- Volunteer numbers
- Number of Green Flag Awards
- Income generation levels
- Management of flora and fauna

Appendix - The Country Parks' contribution to wider outcomes

We believe that the country parks are important in their own right, but we also value the significant contribution they make to wider outcomes contained within KCC's "Increasing Opportunities and Improving Outcomes" strategic framework, the Kent Environment Strategy and the Kent Health and Wellbeing Strategy. The parks also support a number of KCC's wider responsibilities such as the AONB Management Plan and the fulfilment of the Biodiversity Duty which the government has placed on public authorities.

The following table highlights the outcomes contained in these documents which the Country Parks help to deliver.

KCC STRATEGIC AND SUPPORTING OUTCOMES	KENT HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY OUTCOMES	KENT ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY OUTCOMES
<p>Children and young people in Kent get the best start in life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kent's communities are resilient and provide strong and safe environments to successfully raise children and young people • Children and young people have better physical and mental health 	<p>Every child has the best start in life</p>	<p>Ensure sustainable access and connectivity for businesses and communities</p>
<p>Communities benefit from economic growth by being in-work, healthy and enjoying a good quality of life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and mental health is improved by supporting people to take more responsibility for their own health and wellbeing • Kent residents enjoy a good quality of life, and more people benefit from greater social, cultural and sporting opportunities • Kent's physical and natural environment is protected, enhanced and enjoyed by residents and visitors 	<p>Effective prevention of ill health by people taking greater responsibility for their health and wellbeing</p>	<p>Conserve and enhance the quality and supply of Kent's natural resources and assets</p>
<p>Older and vulnerable residents are safe and supported with choices to live independently</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with mental health issues and dementia are assessed and treated earlier and are supported to live well • Older and vulnerable residents feel socially included 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	