

Kent Country Parks

Strategy

2023-2028



Kent
County
Council
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Consultation on the Country Parks Strategy 2023-28 took place from 4th October to 12th December 2022. This Strategy has been developed based on the responses received.

Alternative formats

Easy Read and Large Print versions of this document are available.

If you require the document in any other alternative format or language, please email alternativeformats@kent.gov.uk or call 03000 42 15 53 (text relay service number: 18001 03000 42 15 53). This number goes to an answering machine, which is monitored during office hours.

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 draft five-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 wonderful green spaces.

Our connection with the natural environment has never been more important. Nor has our ability to step away from the urban environment, to breathe fresh air and to give time to our physical and mental health been more needed. Our network of Country Parks provides space for exercise, for reflection and for learning and enables us to spend time with our friends and family. We are very proud of the work that we do and of the quality landscape, habitat and facilities that we manage to give Kent's residents and visitors an outstanding visit each and every time.

As we work through the challenges faced by the climate emergency alongside the changing economic backdrop, we want to make sure that the services we are providing are meeting the needs of our communities. I would therefore urge you to take the time to respond to the current public consultation on the next five-year Country Parks Strategy and help us make the Country Parks even better for you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Mike Hill
Cabinet Member for Community
and Regulatory Services

2. Some highlights of the 2017-2021 Strategy

1. Over 6.5million visitors to the parks over the four-year period.
2. Seven Green Flags retained every year with an eighth achieved in 2021.
3. All four Country Parks entered received a silver gilt or gold award every year from the South and South East in Bloom award scheme and Brockhill Country Park won Best Country Park in the South East award in 2018 and again in 2019.
4. Over 30,000 children took part in educational activities or events and over 600 adults took part in training or qualifications with our team giving the opportunity to inspire a new generation as well as upskill our adult learners.
5. Expansion of our volunteer team network to include regular volunteering opportunities at five sites and over 40,000 volunteer hours being provided. Volunteering is essential in supporting the work of the team and also provides opportunities for people to connect to their local community alongside the health benefits of keeping fit and active in the outdoors.
6. £400,000 of investment from the Public Health Containment Management Fund that has been used to repair and maintain the Country Parks following their extensive use during the pandemic and to 'build back better' with accessibility improvements including new surfaced circular pathways and walking routes.
7. The service has established a digital presence with customers now using social media as their main communication channel and has successfully launched an online booking platform for events and other paid for services such as venue hire and birthday parties.
8. The first Changing Spaces accessible toilet was opened at Shorne Woods Country Park giving visitors with additional needs access to first class facilities to support them to visit the countryside for the first time, or to be able to stay longer when they do.
9. Achieved Ready to Burn industry accreditation for firewood being produced and sold by the service which cements our position as a responsible and trustworthy fuel supplier to our local communities.



3. Vision and Strategic Aims

Our vision for the Kent Country Parks Service is:

“To provide an inspirational, accessible and sustainable countryside experience for all Kent’s residents and visitors.”

This vision is supported by three strategic aims:

- 1.** Provide a Country Park network of well connected, high quality and biodiverse greenspace across Kent.
- 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.** Consolidate the financial sustainability of the Country Parks through maximising self-financing and external funding opportunities.

4. The Kent Country Park Network

The Kent Country Parks service currently manages nine principal Country Parks across the county:

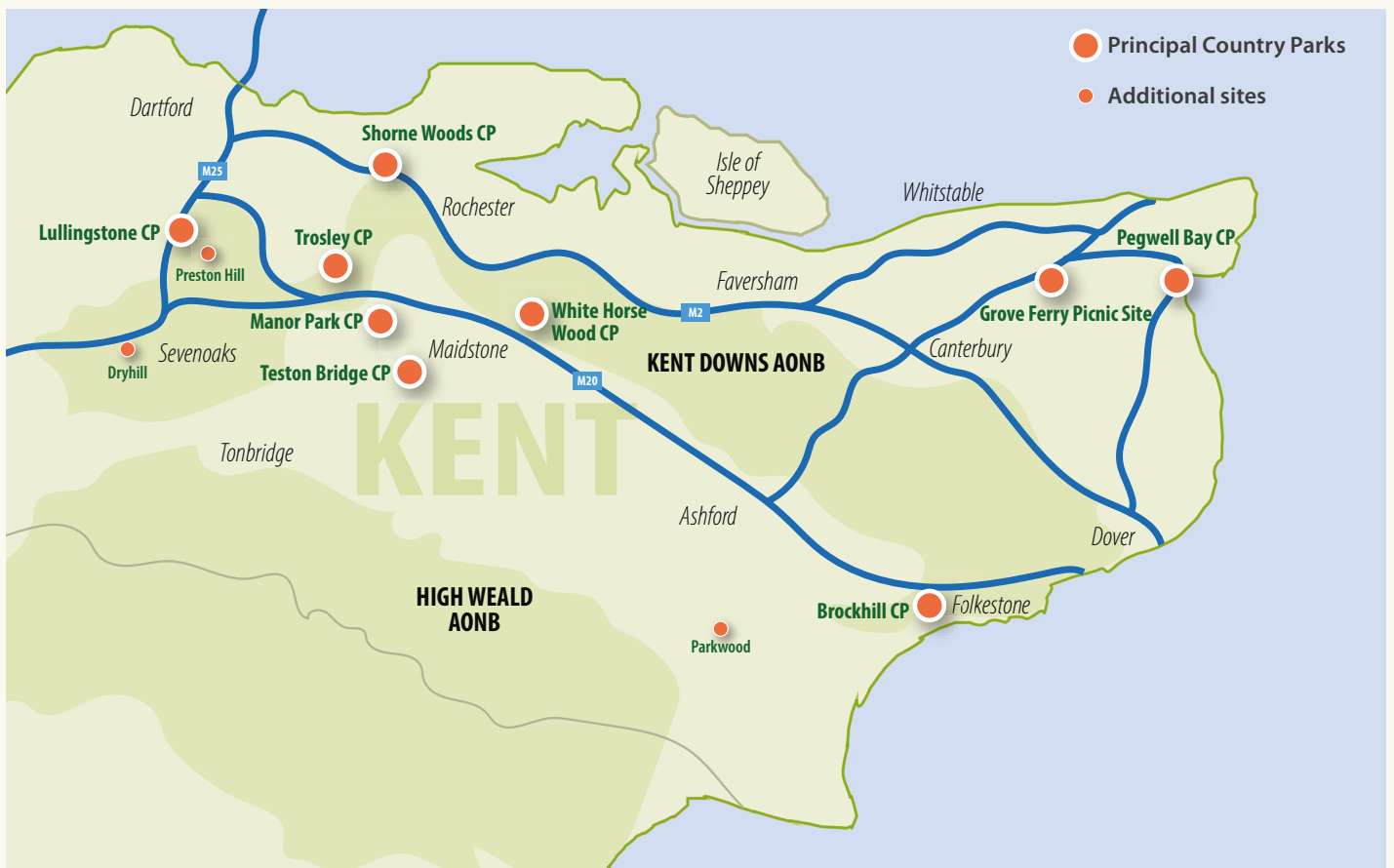
- Shorne Woods Country Park
- Lullingstone Country Park
- Brockhill Country Park
- Trosley Country Park
- Teston Bridge Country Park
- Manor Park Country Park
- Pegwell Bay Country Park
- Grove Ferry Picnic Site
- White Horse Wood Country Park



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

In addition, the Kent Country Parks services manages three further sites under a rolling three year management arrangement:

- Preston Hill Countryside Site
- Dryhill Countryside Site
- Parkwood Picnic Site





5. Strategic Aim 1

To provide a Country Park network of well connected, high quality and biodiverse greenspace across Kent.

Objectives

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.

We will work to ensure that the parks and the visitor facilities are maintained and improved to the highest possible standards in line with the individual management plan for each site. We will meet all statutory and grant obligations and mirror industry best practise in our custodianship of the land. We will retain the eight Green Flag Awards that we currently hold and seek continued opportunities for additional external recognition through programmes such as the South and South East in Bloom Awards.

2. Our Country Parks are well connected through physical networks and collaborative partnerships to enable the best results for people, nature and the environment.

We will work to establish connectivity with neighbouring and remote landowners to provide a bigger network of corridors for wildlife enabling nature to move freely between different environments and to help to

restore and preserve biodiversity. Through collaborative partnerships we will support opportunities to connect and improve connectivity across greenspace in Kent with opportunities to increase or diversify the current portfolio being explored. We will use the knowledge and expertise of the Kent Country Parks team to benefit partnerships that are seeking to increase the connectivity of people, nature and the environment across Kent through actively participating in networks supporting this agenda.

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.

Kent County Council's Country Parks include some 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 part of a National Nature Reserve which alongside adjacent land contains internationally important habitat, three contain significant areas of land designated by Natural England as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and three are Local Wildlife Sites.



Each park has an individual management plan that is endorsed, where needed, by Natural England and provides the framework to allow the Kent Country Parks team to carry out appropriate management to conserve and improve the landscape and the biodiversity of the parks alongside providing visitor access and management. This management approach alongside interpretation aids and engagement opportunities seek to improve visitors understanding of the landscape, heritage and biodiversity whilst ensuring they remain protected for the future.

4. Our Country Parks support the achievement of the outcomes of the Kent Environment Strategy, the Kent Biodiversity Strategy and the Kent Nature Recovery Strategy.

Through its strategic policies Kent County Council is working with partners to protect and enhance our natural and historic environment at the same time as promoting greener, cleaner recovery from the pandemic and ongoing economic growth and resilience. The Kent Country Parks will continue to play their part in supporting the outcomes of the Kent Environment Strategy, the Kent Biodiversity Strategy and the Kent Nature Recovery Strategy ensuring Kent's natural resources and assets are managed in order to support the needs of the natural environment for generations to come.



6. Strategic Aim 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.

Objectives

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.

We want our Country Parks to be accessible to all, from children to adults across all abilities. We will take bold steps to provide first class accessibility improvements to the Country Parks through the provision of at least two further Changing Spaces toilet facilities and through a programme of upgrades to our playgrounds.

This will be combined with ongoing development and maintenance of connected path networks that enable visitors to explore further the Country Parks and their neighbouring greenspaces where this is appropriate.

Through better more connected partnership approaches to access we will not only join up the Country Parks with other landowners but will also take a strategic oversight approach to biodiversity enhancements and improvements so that the landscape and the natural environment also benefit from improved partnership working. We will seek to increase access to greenspace where this is appropriate with a view to aligning the equity of access across the whole of Kent.





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.

Parks are a great place for people of all ages to learn about the world around them, to grow their confidence and to understand how each of our actions can have an impact on the local and global environment and contribute to the step change that is needed to support and recover nature and respond to the climate emergency. By expanding our education, training and events offering to include more topics, a greater number of opportunities for school visits and vocational training courses and more events for our children we will engage and inspire the next generation of environmentally aware citizens who have the confidence and ability to take sustainable decisions about their lives, their work and their local community.

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.

Our parks already benefit from the thousands of hours of hard work and dedication provided by our volunteers each year. Their input is invaluable, and we will continue to develop our volunteering programmes so that additional opportunities to support the service can be provided. We will provide volunteering programmes that are enjoyable and rewarding and where recognition is provided to those who generously give us their time, energy and expertise.



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.

The physical and mental health benefits of being in the outdoors are becoming increasingly recognised and this was especially apparent during the pandemic when the ability of communities to access their local greenspace became a significant part of daily life. We will work with health partners and charities to develop health initiatives in the parks and to provide services and facilities that allow visitors to focus on their physical and mental health needs when they visit.

7. Strategic Aim 3

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

Objectives

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.

The Kent Country Parks service is already generating income to cover approximately 76% of its running costs through a range of paid for services including catering, education, events, venue hire and other paid for services. Over the next five years the service will review the efficiency of these income generating services and seek to maximise the income and the profitability of the services offered. Alongside this we will look for opportunities to expand our offer across the Country Parks sites (where this is possible) either through existing income streams or by adopting new and innovative services or facilities.

We recognise the need to balance financial sustainability with providing offers and activities across a range of price points for our customers. This includes externally funded/ subsidised education sessions, a range of prices in the shops, cafes and events programme, free activities at Open Days and plenty of picnic benches to allow visitors to bring and enjoy their own food and drink.



We will use our own knowledge and the experience of industry to adopt the most efficient methods of delivering services and facilities ensuring that every pound of income generated adds maximum return to the service and its ongoing provision.

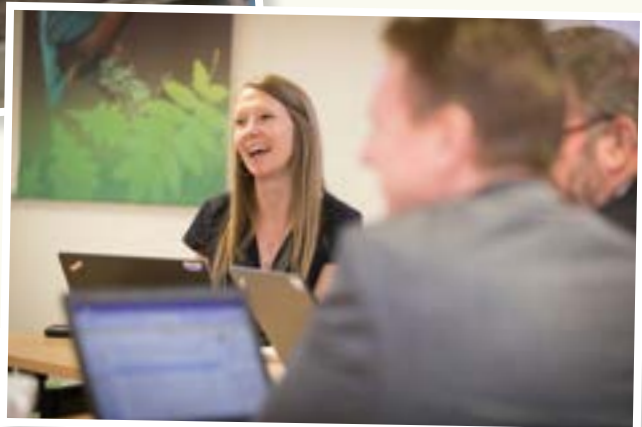
10. Explore, develop and secure external funding opportunities that complement the work of the Country Parks.

We will actively seek opportunities for external grant funding and, where appropriate, private business collaboration or sponsorship in order to continue to improve

our financial sustainability and to enable us to respond with agility to legislative or best practise changes in our industry.

11. The portfolio of Country Parks sites provides 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.

We will act on the findings of our research to continue to understand who is using our parks and how. We will take appropriate action to ensure that visitors to our parks reflect the diverse population of Kent. We will continue to adopt high professional standards to ensure that our management provides the best level of environmental protection balanced with the right to access the countryside and that we take every opportunity to be part of our local communities. We will promote environmental conservation and play our part in education and achievement of the climate emergency response.



8. Delivery and Performance Management

This Strategy will be delivered by the Country Parks team who will work in partnership with other KCC departments, external stakeholders and our local communities 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
- Social media ratings
- Volunteer hours
- Number of external awards
- Income generation levels
- Management of flora and fauna

We commit to producing an annual report outlining our progress against these indicators and to making this available to all our visitors and stakeholders.

Appendix

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 Framing Kent's Future 2022-2026 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 Framework outcomes	Kent Health and Wellbeing Strategy Outcomes	Kent Environment Strategy Outcomes
Priority 1: Levelling Up Kent		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will maximise the use of national skills funding, including the apprenticeship levy and the lifelong learning entitlement to create real opportunities for people to access training opportunities throughout their lives that lead to employment in vocational and technical fields. We will adopt an unrelenting focus on reducing cardiovascular disease in our population by continuing to focus on healthier behaviours, stopping smoking, taking up exercise and healthier eating. 	Every child has the best start in life.	Ensure sustainable access and connectivity for businesses and communities.
Priority 2: Infrastructure for Communities		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will invest in Kent's high-quality landscapes and rural environment, protecting and enhancing productive farmland and protected landscapes and working with our partners to tackle climate change challenges such as the growing demands on water supply as our county grows. We will enable a coordinated, properly resourced and sustainable volunteering infrastructure across the county, including building upon the Kent Volunteer Partnership pilot project. We will work with civil society and other partners to find ways to tackle social isolation and loneliness, including 'social prescribing' to community groups and activities that help people connect with others, building upon the successes of the Connected Communities project and through our Community Wardens, targeting them where they are most needed. We will create the right conditions to ensure there is a community-based offer of activities for young people that is led by the community and meets the needs of a diverse population. 	Effective prevention of ill health by people taking greater responsibility for their health and wellbeing.	Conserve and enhance the quality and supply of Kent's natural resources and assets.
Priority 3: Environmental Step Change		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will improve access for our residents to green and natural spaces especially in urban and deprived areas and through our Public Rights of Way network to improve health and wellbeing outcomes. We will be a community leader in action for pollinators and develop KCC's own estate for the benefit of these vital insects. We will invest in our natural capital to maximise nature-based solutions that assist in adaptation to, and mitigation of climate change impacts. 	The quality of life for people with long term conditions is enhanced and they have access to good quality care and support.	Strengthen our understanding of the health, social and economic value of our natural and historical assets.
Priority 4: New Models of Care and Support		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will work within the system to ensure a strong focus on preventative community services, building a strong strategic relationship with the social sector in Kent and their role in supporting a system-wide focus on prevention. 	<p>People with mental health issues are supported to live well.</p> <p>People with dementia are assessed and treated earlier and supported to live well.</p>	

Contact us

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