

From: **Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport**

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

Subject: **Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28**

Key Decision: 23/00024

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary: This report provides an update on the recent consultation that was undertaken on the proposed Strategy for Kent Country Parks 2023-28. It provides an overview of the findings, as well as the proposed amendments to the Strategy.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services is asked to agree to adopt the Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28 and to delegate to the Growth and Communities Director, in consultation the Cabinet Member, any further decisions that may be appropriate to deliver the Strategy as shown at Appendix A.

1. Introduction

1.1 Kent Country Parks Service manages nine country parks and three smaller countryside sites across the county.

1.2 In summary the Service:

- Hold eight Green Flags;
- Receives 1.6 million annual visitors;
- Benefits from regular volunteering opportunities at five sites and over 10,000 volunteer hours per year;
- Delivers environmental education, Forest Schools, and nature-themed birthday parties to 7,000 children per annum;
- Incorporates over 30km of accessible routes; and
- Offers accessible Changing Spaces toilets at three sites.

1.3 The current strategy ran from 2017 – 2021 and as such a new strategy was drafted during 2021/22, informed by contributions from an informal Members' Working Group.

1.4 The 2023 – 2028 Strategy was consulted upon from 4th October 2022 to 12th December 2022, following its endorsement by the Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee in March 2022.

2. The Consultation Results

- 2.1 A Report on the consultation results was prepared by Blackwood Bayne Ltd
- 2.2 There were 387 respondents to the Strategy consultation, of whom 93.6% were Kent residents and 2.4% were residents of Medway or further afield. The remainder of respondents had replied in their capacity as a business, Parish / Town / Borough / District / County Councillor, charity, voluntary or community sector organisation, or 'other'.
- 2.3 318 respondents had visited a Country Park within the last year.
- 2.4 On strength of agreement with the vision, *"To provide an inspirational, accessible and sustainable countryside experience for all Kent's residents and visitors"*, 91% of respondents agreed.
- 2.5 The proposed strategy put forward three Strategic Aims:
1. Provide a Country Park network of well-connected high quality and biodiverse greenspace across Kent. 96% of consultees agreed with Strategic Aim 1
 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. 86% of consultees agreed with Strategic Aim 2
 3. Consolidate the financial sustainability of the Country Parks through maximising self-financing and external funding opportunities. 71% of consultees agreed with Strategic Aim 3
- 2.6 Taking into account the consultation responses plus further input from the informal Members' Working Group, the following actions on the Strategy are proposed:
- To maintain the Strategy's Vision and Objectives unchanged, given overall strong agreement.
 - To articulate more clearly in the Strategy what we mean by accessibility at Country Parks under Objective 5 by adding the following sentence: *We want our Country Parks to be accessible to all, from children to adults across all abilities.*
 - To include a paragraph in the text accompanying Objective 9 which increases understanding of this objective as follows: *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.*

2.7 In addition, the following delivery mechanisms for the Strategy will be strengthened or adapted in light of consultation feedback:

- To recognise the strong levels of support for Strategic Aim 1 through actions in Country Parks Business Plan - clearly communicating what we are doing for biodiversity through interpretation, membership of strategic groups and new quarterly newsletters.
- To clearly communicate through delivery of the Country Parks Business Plan that income generated at Country Parks including from car parks goes back into the running of Country Parks facilities.
- To look for more effective ways to communicate with younger customers as well as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities during the delivery of our Business Plan.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 This Strategy will be delivered through the County Council's capital and revenue funding of the Kent Country Parks Service, and through the income that the service generates year on year. The Service in 2021/22 was 76% cost neutral to the authority and as per Strategic Aim 3, it will consolidate its financial sustainability over the course of the Strategy. Monitoring and performance will be through the Medium-Term Financial Planning process.

4. Legal implications

4.1 There are no legal implications arising from the proposed recommendations.

5. Equalities implications

5.1 The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) on the proposed Strategy determined that there is no indication that the Strategy will have an adverse equality impact on any of the protected characteristics.

5.2 The consultation responses do not change that determination but do suggest a course of action for the Service in better targeting communications to underrepresented or other target groups. This course of action has been included in the Kent Country Parks Business Plan for 2023/24 and will be implemented and monitored against delivery of the Business Plan.

6. Other corporate implications

6.1 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 the strategic framework, '*Framing Kent's Future 2022-2026*' as follows:

Priority 1: Levelling Up Kent

- *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. The Country Parks provide apprenticeships and volunteering opportunities.

- *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. The Country Parks provide local opportunities for Kent residents to exercise outdoors through our network of trails, trim trails and both formal and informal walks and events.*

Priority 2: Infrastructure for Communities

- *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. The Country Parks are managed for biodiversity and actively seek opportunities for biodiversity enhancement. The Country Parks contain Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Wildlife Sites, and four of the parks are situated within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.*
- *We will enable a coordinated, properly resourced and sustainable volunteering infrastructure across the county, including building upon the Kent Volunteer Partnership pilot project. The Country Parks offer regular conservation volunteering opportunities.*
- *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. Country Parks staff lead on the Kent and Medway Green Social Prescribing Forum and actively seek opportunities to link the Country Parks with Public Health initiatives as well as links with charitable organisations and partners.*
- *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. The Country Parks engage with Children and Young People through a range of school-based, educational activities, holiday events for families, toddler groups and more.*

Priority 3: Environmental Step Change

- *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. The Country Parks are linked to the Public Rights of Way network and promote these through signage and interpretation.*
- *We will be a community leader in action for pollinators and develop KCC's own estate for the benefit of these vital insects. The Country Parks management plans are linked to Kent's Plan Bee and actively managed for pollinators.*

- *We will invest in our natural capital to maximise nature-based solutions that assist in adaptation to, and mitigation of climate change impacts. Country Parks staff take part in the Kent Nature Partnership's Management Working Group and are actively seeking ways to maximise nature-based solutions through delivery of the Kent Environment Strategy.*

Priority 4: New Models of Care and Support

- *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. Country Parks staff collaborate regularly with other Kent County Council teams such as Community Safety, Active Kent and Medway and Public Health to establish a joined-up approach to prevention.*

6.2 The Country Parks Strategy 2023-28 will contribute to the Kent Environment Strategy as follows:

- Conserve and enhance the quality and supply of Kent's natural resources and assets.
- Strengthen our understanding of the health, social and economic value of our natural and historical assets.

7 Governance

7.1 The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to delegate to Stephanie Holt-Castle as Growth and Communities Director, in consultation with Mike Hill as the relevant Cabinet Member, any further decisions that may be appropriate to deliver the Strategy.

8 Conclusions

8.1 Subject to comments from Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee, the three Aims and eleven Objectives will inform and underpin the Service's 2023/24 Business Plan, as well as subsequent annual business plans.

8.2 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.

8.3 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

8.4 The Country Parks team will produce an annual report outlining progress against these indicators and will make this available to all visitors and stakeholders.

9 Recommendation(s)

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services is asked to agree to adopt the Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-28 and to delegate to the Growth and Communities Director, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member, any further decisions that may be appropriate to deliver the Strategy as shown at Appendix A.

10. Background Documents

- Appendix A – Record of Decision
- Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023-2028
- [Kent Country Parks Strategy](#) - Summary of Consultation Responses
- [Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023 - 2028 Consultation Results - Main Report](#)
- [Kent Country Parks Strategy 2023 - 2028 Consultation Results - Appendix](#)
- [Kent Country Parks Strategy Questionnaire.pdf](#)
- [EQIA Country Parks Strategy Aug 2022.pdf \(kent.gov.uk\)](#)

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