

Report to	Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment
Date	26 July, 2010
Report By	Director of Transport and Environment
Title of Report	Functions of South Downs Joint Committee
Purpose of Report	To consider the future of functions currently carried out on behalf of the County Council by the South Downs Joint Committee at its demise.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Cabinet Member is recommended to:

(1) instruct officers to prepare for the return to the County Council from 1 April 2011 of the management of all aspects of Rights of Way in the South Downs, the management of Seven Sisters Country Park and rural Dutch Elm Disease control;

(2) limit net expenditure by the County Council on Rights of Way in the South Downs, Seven Sisters Country Park and rural Dutch Elm Disease control to no more than income from these plus the current budget for the County Council's contribution to the South Downs Joint Committee;

(3) seek partnership contributions towards the delivery of Rights of Way management, Seven Sisters Country Park and Dutch Elm Disease control; and

(4) declare Exceat Cottage to be surplus to the requirements of the Transport and Environment Department with a view to seek its disposal by the Corporate Resources Directorate.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 East Sussex County Council (ESCC) makes an annual contribution to support the South Downs Joint Committee (SDJC) to enable it to undertake a range of tasks including the day-to-day management of Rights of Way and Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP), and rural Dutch Elm Disease (DED) control in East Sussex (£110,500 in 2010/11). The direct contributions plus income from parking fees and rents at the Seven Sisters Country Park amount to some £310,000 per annum. From April 2011 these budgets will be re-allocated to the direct management of these functions and the package of services will be designed to be delivered within this overall sum. This will also need to cover the property maintenance costs

1.2 One such property, Exceat Cottage, was previously used by ESCC volunteer rangers but is currently unused and has become uninhabitable. The building works required to return the property, to a habitable state would cost around £215,000.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) was established on 1 April 2010, and has been operating in shadow form. The SDNPA will become fully operational and the SDJC cease to exist on 1 April 2011. From April 2011, ESCC will remain the Highway Authority for the Downs, responsible for Rights of Way (RoW), will continue to have the powers to operate DED control, and will continue to own Seven Sisters Country Park.

2.2 On 15 June the shadow SDNPA decided not to offer to take on DED control and not to offer to own or manage Seven Sisters Country Park at this time. The shadow SDNPA made no decision on the management of RoW, other than to establish a local presence. The shadow SDNPA did offer to work in partnership on all three functions. No other organisations have offered to carry out these functions.

3. Rights of Way

3.1 Efficiencies and economies could be found within this function if carried out over the larger area of the whole County, including the South Downs, with ESCC experience in running a large RoW network and carrying out all of the capital maintenance and legal and enforcement work in the SDNPA area. Hampshire County Council and West Sussex County Council have already come to this conclusion. The RoW within the ESCC portion of the SDNP will be managed to the same standard as the rest of RoW network within East Sussex. Any provision above this standard will be the subject of further discussion with the National Park Authority and other Highway Authorities.

4. Seven Sisters Country Park

4.1 Currently at Seven Sisters Country Park there is a backlog of property capital and maintenance work, as well as income-generating opportunities. Officers are currently assessing the problems and opportunities brought by the management of the park, and to set out clear objectives, before long term decisions can be made about its future. The SDNPA has been invited to join this process and to consider how it might best assist the long term conservation management of this popular and important area.

4.2 Exceat Cottage is part of the main complex of buildings at the park; it lies beside the A259 up the hill to the north. The building is currently unused and no use has been identified for it in the future management of the park. The cost of its restoration, estimated at around £215,000, could not be funded by rent from the types of uses that are currently part of the park's activities.

5. Dutch Elm Disease Control

5.1 The County Council first undertook DED control in the 1970s. The SDJC currently manages a DED control programme for the rural area between Brighton and Eastbourne. From Eastbourne to Shoreham, public and private land owners, and those responsible for roadside trees, take action to remove infected trees. A co-ordinated programme is essential as the disease spreads across administrative boundaries. County Council officers are co-ordinating development of a potential joint control scheme, also involving the SDNPA.

6. Environmental Issues

6.1 The County Council has a duty to have regard to the conservation of the SDNPA and a duty to have regard to biodiversity (a feature of the South Downs) in all of its work. Within Seven Sisters Country Park, the County Council has additional duties to conserve and enhance the Seven Sisters Site of Special Scientific Interest and conserve the Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listed Buildings that we own.

7. Community Safety Issues

7.1 The County Council will need to continue to ensure that its property is safe for the public to enjoy.

8. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

8.1 Although the County Council will not receive the grant aid from Natural England that is currently enjoyed by the SDJC, a basic form of the three functions currently carried out by the SDJC can be delivered by the County Council from 2011/12 onwards, using the budget currently contributed to the SDJC, and with income from Seven Sisters Country Park.

RUPERT CLUBB
Director of Transport and Environment

Contact Officer: Simon Hickmott Tel. No. 01273 482660

Local Member: All

Background Documents: None