

CABINET

3 March 2004

THE SOUTH DOWNS INTERIM MANAGEMENT PLAN

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report relates to the preparation and planned implementation of an Interim South Downs Management Plan. The Plan is initially intended to provide for the management of the combined East Hampshire and Sussex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. However, depending on the eventual outcome of the Countryside Agency's current proposals for the establishment of a new South Downs National Park, such a Plan may well provide a blue-print for the long-term management of a somewhat larger Park area, by a National Park Authority. The report, therefore, sets out the broad content of the Interim Plan, which is currently at a Draft stage, and outlines the further planned stages for its emergence.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Cabinet confirms the City Council's support for the principles and policies of the Interim South Downs Management Plan and authorises its submission to DEFRA, subject to the provisos that: (a) the Plan will be further improved and refined during the coming six months and that a consolidated Plan will be made available to this Authority, prior to any public consultation and that; (b) further work on enhancing the Interim Plan should include additional sections relating to the needs of the Historic Environment, the provision of a co-ordinated Tourism Strategy and the further development of a comprehensive data-set for the South Downs area.

CABINET3 March 2004THE SOUTH DOWNS INTERIM MANAGEMENT PLANREPORT OF DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICESDETAIL:1 Introduction

1.1 Under the terms of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, local authorities in England and Wales were given responsibility for producing management plans for the designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), by April 2004. The process of producing such a plan for the East Hampshire AONB and Sussex Downs AONB was, however, delayed by the Countryside Agency's (CA) decision to proceed towards designating the area as part of a new South Downs National Park. Due to the resultant delay in starting work on a definitive Plan, it was agreed that an Interim Plan would be produced by April 2004, based around Vision and Management Plan Documents that had been prepared in 1998. In addition to this, a further aim is to provide a comprehensive policy framework around which individual business plans or action plans can subsequently be developed.

2 The Interim Plan

2.1 The Management Plan was prepared, in draft form, by officers of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) and East Hampshire AONB (EHAONB). The Plan's content has recently been reported to both the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and the East Hampshire AONB Joint Advisory Committee where, in general terms, the draft version met with approval. The text of this important document which, when adopted will have statutory force, is attached to this report at Appendix I.

2.2 As indicated above, the Plan has 'interim' status. It is not, therefore, intended to be the definitive management plan for the Sussex Downs and East Hampshire AONBs, for the longer term. Indeed, it has been designed to be capable of amendment and updating, as future circumstances require. In practice, the Plan may serve to provide only for the period up until the establishment of a new National Park for the South Downs and, with that, the inauguration of a National Park Authority, which would then take over the administration of the Park area from the present local authorities.

2.3 Nevertheless, the principle has already been established by both the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and the Joint Advisory Committee, to the effect that a Management Plan must be a document which addresses the long-term needs of the protected landscape of the South Downs, as an entity, and does not simply provide a management tool which facilitates the role to be undertaken by the SDCB, the JAC or any potential South Downs National Park Authority. Furthermore, such a Plan must be capable of linking closely and effectively, with individual Community Strategies across the area of the South Downs.

2.4 Early progress on the preparation of a South Downs Interim Plan, to cover the combined area of the adjacent AONBs, began in 1998 but was postponed following the announcement by Government of its wish to establish possible new National Parks in the New Forest and the South Downs. In January 2003, following on from the significant progress made by the

Countryside Agency in progressing National Park Proposals for the South Downs, the Conservation Board and the Joint Advisory Committee agreed to resume the process of preparing a Management Plan, with the intention of completing the Plan over a 2-year period, subject to the availability of adequate funding.

- 2.5 In the event, a funding package of sufficient size to cover the cost of Plan production was later confirmed by the Countryside Agency. However, in regard to production time-scale, the Countryside Agency stipulated that the Conservation Board and Joint Advisory Committee should fully meet the requirements of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which had called for the production of such a Plan by Spring 2004.
- 2.6 Therefore, the Board and Joint Advisory Committee were advised, in April 2003, of the revised timetable and although funding arrangements had not been finalised, work on the Management Plan was resumed. As part of its revised programme for Plan production, the Countryside Agency also called for formal 'agreement' by the Conservation Board (given in January 2004), the Joint Advisory Committee (in February), and the local authorities in Hampshire (reporting during March). If adhered to, such a sequence of approvals would then allow the Plan to be put before the Secretary of State in April 2004.
- 2.7 It should be emphasised, therefore, that the Interim South Downs Management Plan has been prepared in the context of a very rigorous timetable. The result of this is that there are certain policy areas that need to be highlighted further. In other areas, additional work will be required although, in most instances, this will require little more than detailed editing of the text, or attention to matters of design and graphic presentation.
- 2.8 Nevertheless, there is a particular concern that the policy objectives and key actions, put forward in the draft Plan, do not yet make sufficient provision for the historic environment within the South Downs, or for a positive tourism strategy for this area. Such a strategy would become even more important in the context of potentially increasing visitor pressures, in the event of a National Park being established. Similarly, clear policies for the historic environment, in both its landscape and built form, are currently essential and may become increasingly so in the future in the face of development pressures.
- 2.9 A further, specific, shortcoming in the draft version of the Plan is that there is a lack of, or inconsistency in assembling data in some policy areas across the South Downs as a whole. This has prevented the completion of a comprehensive evidence-based policy framework. However, this particular issue has, to an extent, been addressed through the increasing involvement of three Topic Groups; set up to inform the areas of 'Community and Economy, 'Access and Recreation' and 'Land Management'.
- 2.10 Although originally set up to provide key background information for the Countryside Agency and its SDNP consultations, these Groups were later reconvened to assist with the emergence of the Interim Management Plan. In addition, Officers of the various key agencies have contributed specialist help. Nevertheless, the matter of developing and establishing a comprehensive South Downs data set continues to be high priority and requires positive action in the very near future.
- 2.11 The Interim Plan, in its present form, covers a wide range of issues including: the expression of a 'Vision for the South Downs'; recognition of the needs of the South Downs as a protected landscape; a clear statement of strategic policy and management objectives and; the need to anticipate, and provide for, the consequences of various "issues, trends and threats" affecting the Downs. The Plan also incorporates, under specific headings, a series of Suggested Key Actions, to be initiated during the period 2004/07.

- 2.12 The Plan, at this stage, does still require refinement and further strengthening in certain areas. Such additional work will include, for example, a State of the South Downs Report and the further development of a Business Plan to define and clarify the role of the SDCB and JAC, in delivering the Management Plan. Furthermore, to provide a more broadly based input, a programme of public consultation and engagement will form part of the production schedule. It is intended that this should be carried out as soon as possible. Nevertheless, some further consolidation of the Interim Plan document will need to be carried out before such consultations can be set in motion.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 In broad terms, the Interim Management Plan for the South Downs provides an acceptable foundation for the longer-term. However, as explained above, the document is not yet fully complete. It has, therefore, been agreed by the Board and JAC that an additional period, of up to six months, should be spent in improving the content and presentation of the Interim Plan and preparing it for a formal round of public consultation. Improvements, particularly to the Key Action Points, will be made in conjunction with the key agencies and, as part of a future Business Plan.
- 3.2 Consequently, it is recommended that Cabinet should agree the principles and general thrust of the Key Actions contained in the Interim Plan. The Management Plan should be agreed in its current form for submission to the Secretary of State, so as to meet the Council's statutory responsibility to produce a management plan by April 2004. However, because of the further work that is needed, it is also recommended that such agreement should be given on the basis that:
- a) The Interim Plan will be refined and improved, in order to prepare it for public consultation, and that the consolidated Plan will be made available to the partner authorities for further scrutiny before any such consultation is undertaken and that;
 - b) In strengthening the Interim document, attention will be paid to the inclusion of a section more specifically dealing with the Historic Environment and that a further new section will be introduced, to provide for a co-ordinated Tourism Strategy for the South Downs. A further part of such necessary consolidation will be the completion of a comprehensive data set, for the whole of the South Downs area.

3.3 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

4 CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

- 4.1 This report is of relevance to the Corporate Strategy's Aim of maintaining a high quality of rural and village life, by supporting the rural economy and conserving the rural landscape, together with the Strategy's objective of sustaining and improving the natural environment.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 5.1 The Council is responsible for the production of a management plan for AONBs within its area. The Management Plan has been produced by the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and the East Hampshire AONB JAC, on behalf of the local authorities concerned. The City Council already funds the AONB Project Officer and the policies in the Management Plan, which it would be the City Council's responsibility to action, are not likely to have significant cost implications, bearing in mind that these are mostly concerned with existing responsibilities, such as the development and implementation of planning policies.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Files and correspondence held in the Planning Department of the Development Services Directorate.

APPENDIX:

Appendix I: The draft Interim Management Plan for the South Downs. Due to its size, the draft Plan has been attached for Members of Cabinet only. A copy has also been placed in the Members' Library and can be supplied to Members on request.