

CABINET

14 December 2005

THE SOUTH DOWNS MANAGEMENT PLAN – DELEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITY

REPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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RECENT REFERENCES:

CAB 807: Report on the South Downs Interim Management Plan, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2004.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report relates to the ongoing preparation and planned implementation of a 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 larger Park area, by a National Park Authority.

The report sets out brief details of work which is currently being carried out to refine and prepare the Draft Plan for public consultation. Having previously signified its support for the key principles and actions referred to in the earlier Draft Interim Plan, the report now recommends that the City Council should confirm its willingness to delegate authority to the South Downs Joint Committee, in order that work on a South Downs Management Plan can be completed with all reasonable speed and the finished Draft then published for consultation.

The subject of this report is a key decision, not included in the Forward Plan. The Chairman of Principal Scrutiny Committee has been made aware of the position. However, a decision on this matter is required, as a matter of urgency, in order for the City Council to join the other constituent Local Authorities in advising the South Downs Joint Committee of the outcome, in time for that Committee's meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2006.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Cabinet reaffirms the City Council's support for the key ambitions and principal policy issues which are being further developed for inclusion in a South Downs Management Plan.
2. That Cabinet recommends to Council the delegation of responsibility for producing a management plan for that part of the Council's area within the East Hampshire AONB, and the subsequent publication of a Draft Plan, to the South Downs Joint Committee.

CABINET14 December 2005THE SOUTH DOWNS MANAGEMENT PLANREPORT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVEDETAIL: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). 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 these combined areas 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 the Vision and Management Plan Documents that had been initially prepared in 1998. In addition, a further agreed aim was to provide a comprehensive policy framework, from which individual business plans or action plans could be subsequently developed.

2 The Management Plan

2.1 As a result of these considerations, an Interim Management Plan was prepared in draft form by officers of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) and East Hampshire AONB (EHAONB). That Plan's content was subsequently 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 draft was additionally circulated to each of the partner Authorities, including Winchester and, following its Cabinet meeting of the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2004, the City Council was able to add its own broad agreement with the draft document, subject to certain refinements and additional areas of work being incorporated into a revised draft.

2.2 As indicated above, that particular version of a Management Plan was intended to have only 'interim' status. Therefore, whilst it formed an adequate framework, it did not fully provide the clear, descriptive and evidence based document which members and officers considered necessary. Nor was it intended to be the definitive management plan for the Sussex Downs and East Hampshire AONBs for the longer term. Indeed, it was designed from the outset to be capable of amendment and updating, as future circumstances required. Furthermore, in practice, any such Plan might well serve to provide only for the period leading up to the establishment of a National Park for the South Downs. In that event, a newly inaugurated National Park Authority would then take over the administration of the Park area from the present local authorities.

2.3 Despite these caveats, the principle was established at the outset, 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 introduce a new management tool which facilitates the role to be undertaken by any particular managing body, including a possible future 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 However, since the production of the Interim Plan in March 2004, events have moved forward. After an Inquiry period lasting some sixteen months, the South Downs National Park Inquiry closed in March of this year and, with a further nine months having elapsed since then, the Inspector's findings/recommendations and the subsequent decision of the Secretary of State are both keenly awaited. In the meantime, and with the formal agreement and support of all the County, District and Unitary authorities concerned, a South Downs Joint Committee has been appointed and brought into being as the interim management body for the South Downs, replacing both the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and the Joint Advisory Committee of the East Hampshire AONB.
- 2.5 Since its inauguration, the new Joint Committee has sought to address any remaining shortcomings, from those originating in certain aspects of the Interim Management Plan. A great deal of additional work has been carried out in recent months, particularly in the areas of data assembly and analysis. The Joint Committee is aware of its pivotal position in these matters and is conscious that the emerging Management Plan is setting priorities for future action. These include areas of strategic and practical work where the Committee feels it necessary to take a lead, both in the long term interests of the South Downs and, if necessary, to enable a smooth and effective handover to a National Park Authority.
- 2.6 Recently, the Joint Committee has arranged seminars and meetings of the South Downs Topic Groups, in order to help resolve any outstanding reservations from among those previously expressed on behalf of partner Authorities. The Committee, spurred on by its anticipation of a forthcoming decision on the proposed National Park, is now committed to bringing together the various strands of recent work and to move forward to put a draft Management Plan to the Joint Committee in January 2006.
- 2.7 The Plan, at its present stage, does still require refinement and some further strengthening in certain areas. Such additional work will include, for example, the completion of a Draft Business Plan to define and clarify the role of the Joint Committee in delivering the Management Plan. Moreover, some additional work updating needs to be done, in order to take on board the new and rapidly changing rural policy climate.

### 3 Conclusions and Recommendation

- 3.1 The emerging draft of a Management Plan for the South Downs continues to develop a secure foundation for the longer term. As the various changes and refinements have evolved, the draft Plan has presented a clearer and more comprehensive evidence base, a more coherent structure and much sharper strategic policies. However, even as improved so far, the document is not yet fully complete.
- 3.2 Therefore, as a high priority, the new South Downs Joint Committee agreed, at its inaugural meeting on the 8th July 2005, that a member and officer 'task and finish' group should be set up, with the specific purpose of improving the content and presentation of a revised draft. This will then take the form of a strategic Management Plan, which sets out a clear statement of public policy for the area and can then be made subject to full public consultation at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.3 In order to be able progress and complete the task set for this group, each of the partner Authorities has been requested to confirm its willingness for the Joint Committee to undertake the remaining work on behalf of the constituent Local Authorities. As the City Council is directly represented on both the Joint Committee and its Executive Committee, and would be

a statutory consultee, at any consultation stage, it is considered that this request should be agreed to in the interests of guiding and coordinating the delivery of this Plan.

- 3.4 Consequently, it is recommended that Cabinet, having previously indicated its acceptance of the key principles and actions contained in the Interim Plan, should agree to this specific delegation of responsibility, for the purpose of completing the draft Management Plan and submitting it for public consultation.

3.5 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. A draft version of an Interim Management Plan was initially produced by the Sussex Downs Conservation Board and the East Hampshire AONB JAC, on behalf of the local authorities concerned. In taking over the functions and responsibilities of those bodies their immediate successor, the South Downs Joint Committee, has resumed work on the preparation and production of a strategic Management Plan for the South Downs.
- 5.2 The City Council already funds the AONB Project Officer. The policies in the emerging Management Plan which, in advance of the establishment of any National Park regime it would be the City Council's responsibility to action, are not likely to have additional 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 Chief Executives Department .