

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **10 December 2024**
By **Performance and Project Lead and Chief Finance Officer**
Title of Report: **Seven Sisters Country Park New Barn Cottage and Car Park Improvements Capital Projects and other Capital Variations**

Decision

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to:

- 1. Approve a capital variation of £27,000, to provide a capital budget of £207,000, for the New Barn Cottage at Seven Sisters Country Park capital scheme and approve the capital scheme, as set out in section 3 of the report, as part of the approved capital programme for 2024/25;**
 - 2. Approve the Car Park Improvements at Seven Sisters Country Park capital scheme, as set out in section 4 of the report, as part of the approved capital programme for 2024/25; and,**
 - 3. Approve the other capital variations of £86,000 to the capital programme as recommended by Policy & Resources Committee as set out in section 5 of the report.**
-

1. Introduction

- 1.1** This report provides an outline of two proposed capital works projects at Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) for 2024/2025 and seeks approval for these capital schemes as part of the 2024/25 capital programme. It also seeks approval of a capital variation to the New Barn Cottage Refurbishment project and approval of other capital variations as recommended by the Policy and Resources (P&R) Committee.
- 1.2** The capital works budgets of £180,000 for the New Barn Cottage Refurbishment at SSCP and £50,000 for the Car Park Improvements at SSCP were approved by the National Park Authority at its meeting on 9 July 2024. The details of these capital works schemes are provided in this report (sections 3 and 4), as required by the Authority's Financial Procedures, for approval.
- 1.3** A variation of £27,000 to the capital programme is also requested for the New Barn Cottage Refurbishments to provide a necessary contingency for the works.
- 1.4** There are also capital variations to other capital schemes (section 5) for approval as recommended by P&R Committee at their meeting on 21 November 2024.

2. Seven Sisters Project Background

- 2.1** Seven Sisters Country Park was acquired by the South Downs National Park Authority on the 30 July 2021. A programme of refurbishment and improvements were identified in our business case that was approved as part of our conveyancing work by Defra and ESCC. The initial works in 2021-2024 have been completed at Exceat and Foxhole Cottages which

included a refurbished visitor centre, new grab and go refreshment facility, new toilet block, and new Dairy Barn offices. The second phase of works included three refurbished cottages and a new facilities block at the Camping Barn as well as a new sewage treatment plant at Exceat.

- 2.2 The settlement of New Barn, which includes a cottage and barn with outbuildings, was not included in the initial works due to funding restraints and available resources. A phased masterplan was agreed at the start of the SSCP work in 2021 and these buildings have been managed by the Authority with the aim of preservation and future development as part of the Authority's assets within SSCP.
- 2.3 New Barn Cottage has now been vacant for over 4 years (since the previous tenant farmer retired in June 2021) and is showing signs of real deterioration due to the roof structure. The Cottage is an important asset within the Seven Sisters Country Park and, as such, a capital works budget was proposed from the underspend of 2024/2025 to halt the buildings decline and enable refurbishment of the Cottage.
- 2.4 An essential part of SSCP income is the car parking revenue. There are two car parks at SSCP, one is north of the A259 and one is south of the A259. No improvement works to the car parks have been undertaken since the Authority acquired SSCP, and there is significant disruption during busy times due to capacity issues and challenges with coach parking. Therefore, improvement works have been identified to the car parks using the £50,000 from the 2024/2025 capital programme.

3. New Barn Cottage Project

- 3.1 The aim of the New Barn Cottage project is to carry out a basic refurbishment of the building to ensure no further deterioration of the structure and provide improved facilities so that the building can be used for residential purposes.
- 3.2 The works proposed to be undertaken do not require planning approval, but the works will need to be building regulation compliant. The buildings are within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the works will have due regard to the sensitive nature of the environment through a proposed landscape environmental management plan that the approved contractor would need to work in accordance with. As part of the tender process we would ensure the contractor had suitable sustainability credentials.
- 3.3 It is proposed to start procurement for the proposed contractor in December 2024 with appointment in January 2025. The works would then aim to commence in February 2025 with a proposed programme of 3 to 6 months.
- 3.4 A structural engineer, architect and quantity surveyor have already been contracted to manage the proposed project contract for RIBA stages 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. As part of risk reduction, an asbestos survey has also been carried out which identified no asbestos at the property; this will help reduce the uncertainty of costs with contractors. The professional fees of £23,000 for these services have been incurred against the existing capital programme approval of £180,000 in accordance with Financial Regulations, leaving £157,000 for contractor works.
- 3.5 The proposed works within the project scope include a replacement roof, repairs to external walls and internal walls, a basic refurbishment of kitchen and bathroom, repairs to internal floors and ceilings, and works to drainage and water supply.
- 3.6 The exact costs for the project will only be confirmed following the tender process, however, the quantity surveyor has priced the proposed work to the current market rates providing us with an outline of expected costs.
- 3.7 Risks at this stage include an assumption that the existing septic tank is fit for purpose. There is a risk that the proposed roof works may need to be modified once work has started onsite (as many elements are hidden until works start onsite and there may be wood beetle damage in the existing wood). There are potential ecological considerations onsite which may impact the programme due to working within specific timeframes. We may also

receive tenders back that are not within our approved budget in which case we may choose to modify the proposed schedule of works.

- 3.8 The proposed schedule of works is currently identified as having an approximate cost of around £150,000. However, this budget does not include any contingency allowance, so this report seeks approval to increase the original capital budget by £27,000, from £180,000 to £207,000, to provide a contingency sum for the capital works refurbishment of New Barn Cottage in accordance with good practice in capital planning.
- 3.9 Should any additional capital funding become available in the new year, there is potential to incorporate further improvements in the proposed plan which could include green measures such as biomass and solar. We may choose to retrofit these to the building at a later date, but the current focus of the approved budget is to halt the deterioration of the building and enable a basic occupancy.

4. Car Parking Improvement Project

- 4.1 The car parks at SSCP are heavily utilised by visitors. At present there are no bays identified in either car park which leads to confusion by visitors as well as capacity loss when some visitors park in a challenging way. The existing parking meter near the meanders in the southern car park floods and needs to be relocated. The disabled bays need to be clearer and a distinction made for where it is safe for pedestrians to walk.
- 4.2 A scope of works has been defined for the car park south of the A259, this is anticipated to be less than £25,000 and will be conducted as soon as possible during a low ‘off peak’ visitor period of January/February. This work will include devising a layout for cars and coach parking in the southern car park, moving the meander parking meter, and conducting new ‘line works’ across the car park to clearly outline car, coach, disabled and permit holder bays as well as a pedestrian walkway around the car park.
- 4.3 The remaining £25,000 in the capital programme will be utilised in the car park north of the A259 to improve disabled access bays, levels and bay ‘earmarking’ as well as potential car park flows and maximised capacity. These works will be completed after the southern car park works have been completed to ensure we maintain a parking service at all times at the busy visitor site of Seven Sisters Country Park.

5. Other Capital Variations

- 5.1 At their meeting on 21 November 2024, the Policy & Resources Committee considered three capital variations and recommended their approval by the full Authority in accordance with the requirements of the Authority’s Financial Regulations.
- 5.2 The variations requiring full Authority approval are detailed below including information about how they can be funded:

Capital Project Variation	Variation Type	Value	Description
Seven Sisters - Reed Bed	Increase to Capital Budget	264	An increase in budget is required to cover the revised final costs of the works. The variation will be funded from the balance of Defra Water in Protected Landscapes capital grant and the Invest to Save reserve.
Seven Sisters Country Park – Trading Company	Removal of Capital Budget	(220)	At the meeting of the South Downs National Park Authority on 9 July 2024 it was agreed that the Operating Agreement for the management of Seven Sisters Country Park (SSCP) with South Downs Commercial Operations Ltd (SDCOL) would be terminated on 9 October 2024. The Authority has a loan reserve of £220,000 for SDCOL which, as the reserve is no longer required, can be released and held back for

			incorporation into the overall closing position of the company to be reported later in the year.
New Vehicles	Increase to Capital Budget	42	Purchase of a cut and collect machine for the Ranger Service, which needs to be treated as capital expenditure. The purchase is fully funded by the Trust.
	Net Variation	86	

6. Next steps

6.1 If the capital schemes and variations are approved, the Car Park works are planned to start in early 2025 and the New Barn Cottage works are aimed for a start in Feb/March 2025, depending on the tender process, may take up to 3 months to complete.

7. Other implications

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	The Performance and Project Lead will oversee and manage these projects with the support of the SSCP team as required for access and landscaping works in the garden and surrounding the Cottage and for management of the car parks when works are taking place. A contingency sum is proposed to be included in the budget for the New Barn Cottage works in accordance with good practice in capital planning
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	A tender process will be conducted to appoint a contractor for these works to achieve best value for the Authority.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	SSCP delivers on all of the PMP Outcomes and most of the Corporate Plan objectives.
Links to other projects or partner organisations	As part of the overall capital programme of works at Seven Sisters Country Park.
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	New Barn Cottage has the potential for an 'off-grid' solution away from an Oil and Gas solution.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	A number of positive social values are expected as part of the proposals to refurbish the car parks. For contracts below Public Procurement Thresholds, Social Value is included in the evaluation criteria where proportionate and relevant. These tenders will be evaluated on the bidders' approach to social value in terms of how they could improve economic, social and environmental well-being through the delivery of the contract.
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as	Yes, the business case for SDNPA managing the Country Park is based partly on managing access to the Country Park and improving the visitor experiences, for all people regardless of

Implication	Yes*/No
contained within the Equality Act 2010?	background or capabilities. The needs of people under the Equality Act 2010 will be considered as part of the works to the car parks.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	As New Barn Cottage is proposed to be made suitable for residential use, article 8 of part 1 (Right to respect for private and family life) and article 1 of part 2 (Protection of property) may be relevant considerations for future decisions on New Barn Farm and SSCP.
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	No.
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	The longer New Barn Cottage is allowed to deteriorate the greater Health and Safety risks the building will present. The refurbishment works planned will address these. The proposed car par refurbishments will improve the access arrangements at the SSCP car parks and may improve safety through an outlined pedestrian walkway and other works.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	No

8. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Tender costs exceed budget	High	Moderate	Could cost engineer a scope of works within budget. Have used a quantity surveyor to check market value of proposed scope.
Ecological constraints onsite	Moderate	Moderate	Contractors will need to undertake a landscape environmental management plan. Should any sensitive species be identified onsite this may impact programme but shouldn't change budget significantly.
Building unknowns especially in the roof	Moderate	Moderate	Structural engineer has assessed the building and had roof access but until works start some assumptions are always made. Roof structure and issues may only come to light once construction has started.

LIZ GENT / NIGEL MANVELL

Performance and Project Lead / Chief Finance Officer

South Downs National Park Authority

Contact Officer: Liz Gent
Tel: 01730 819238
Email: liz.gent@southdowns.gov.uk
Appendices: None
SDNPA Consultees: Chief Executive; Director of Landscape and Strategy; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Monitoring Officer; Legal Services.
External Consultees: None
Background Documents: [NPA Report 9 July 2024](#)