

**Subject:** The City Downland Estate Plan

**Date of meeting:** 1<sup>st</sup> December 2022

**Report of:** Executive Director, Economy, Environment & Culture

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**Ward(s) affected:** All

**For general release**

## 1. Purpose of the report and policy context

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for the City Downland Estate Plan (CDEP). The CDEP is a policy document that sets out the vision, aims and objectives for the council's Downland Estate over the next 100 years with a focus on what can be achieved over the next 10 years. It is a significant time in the history of the Downland Estate as it was purchased 100 years ago by our ancestors to protect the aquifer surrounding the City.
- 1.3 The CDEP builds on the work started in 2004 with the "The Space to Be" which first set out the council's aims for the Downland Estate. This evolved into the City Downland Estate Asset Management Policy in 2006 (known as the Downland Initiative), which was the first formal policy that recognised the importance of the council's Downland Estate to our city.
- 1.4 The preparation of CDEP is a corporate priority within the council's Corporate Plan and links into the council's Carbon Neutral CN2030 and Climate Change agendas.

## 2. Recommendations

That committee

- 2.1 Approves the City Downland Estate Plan attached at Appendix 1 of this report as policy.
- 2.2 Notes the extensive consultations undertaken over a two year period to inform the CDEP and that following approval and SDNPA's endorsement in February 2023 the focus will be on the first phase of implementation as set out in the two-year Next Steps section.
- 2.3 Notes that any proposals to ringfence additional net income or capital receipts for reinvestment within the CDEP will require a business case to be approved by Policy & Resources Committee within Targeted Budget

Management reports or the annual progress report with decisions taken in the context of the council's overall financial position.

- 2.4 Notes the implementation of the CDEP will be monitored and progress reported back to Policy & Resources annually, the Asset Member Board being the primary reporting point.

### **3. Context and background information**

- 3.1 The council in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century purchased the Downland Estate that surrounded the town to protect the water supply. As of today, our Downland Estate represents nearly 13,000 acres of outstanding natural value for our residents. It is recognised as a significant part of the city's designation as a Biosphere reserve. The Downland Estate also faces threats, including pollution of the groundwater aquifer, reduced biodiversity and a depleted landscape. Climate change poses a myriad of challenges and itself contributes to the loss of biodiversity.
- 3.2 The CDEP offers an opportunity to benchmark the natural capital and values of our Estate. It reflects on these and sets out the decisive actions required to restore and rejuvenate the environment, enriching the social and cultural lives, and physical and mental wellbeing, of all who live here.
- 3.3 The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) has asked all owners of land within the extent of the Park to produce Whole Estate Plans, which are documents that set out their assets, the opportunities, threats the organisation may encounter, and their plans for the future. The Asset Management Board was tasked with producing a Whole Estate Plan for the council's rural estate called the City Downland Estate Plan (CDEP).
- 3.4 To ensure the plan succeeds it was essential to give the community every opportunity to express their views about the future of the Estate and propose and debate the solutions that will deliver our goals. We therefore embarked on a two year programme of consultation - one of the most far-reaching exercises of its kind in the council's history. This encompassed live community events and multiple phases of feedback from the myriad of stakeholders, statutory and interest groups and individuals who are passionate about the future of the Downland Estate. We also worked closely with the South Down National Park (SDNP) to ensure the two authorities work in concert to achieve our shared objectives. The engagement and consultation is detailed in paragraph 5.
- 3.5 Consultations led to the creation of the vision statement in paragraph 3.6 and this is the reference point for all initiatives laid out in the plan. Some of these high level proposals will need to be tested further to determine their final shape. But together they set a clear direction of travel for the estate, for the short, medium and long term.

#### **A Vision for the City Downland Estate**

- 3.6 The vision statement is as follows.

*“A rejuvenated City Downland Estate will be carbon negative and climate resilient, its biodiverse grassland landscape fully restored and teeming with wildlife. The estate will be a leader in sustainable farming, where local food production will flourish.*

*By creating new amenities and opening up more land to the public – and making it easier for all to visit and enjoy - the estate will fulfil its potential to boost the wellbeing of everyone who experiences it. Democratic accountability will be the touchstone for all decisions affecting the estate. This land is ours.”*

### **Preparation of the Plan**

- 3.7 The approach adopted by the national park authority for Whole Estate Plans was taken as a structure for the plan. The structure sets out four areas that must be covered: the Vision, and Asset Audit, Ecosystem Services and Actions.
- 3.8 Public engagement (1<sup>st</sup> stage) provided a steer on the Vision, plus an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of our downland estate, which formed the Ecosystem Services section of the plan. This engagement also gave the foundation aims and objectives for the plan.
- 3.9 An audit of our natural capital assets was undertaken using baseline information provided from Natural Capital Research and Farm Carbon Toolkits. This included information on environmental designations, biodiversity, water, chalk grassland, woodland, farmland, community assets, public access, cultural heritage and homes. All of this information was used to create a set of actions to achieve the objectives of the plan which are prioritised into short, medium and long term. In deciding which areas to prioritise, an important criterion has been the potential for individual initiatives to benefit multiple ecosystems and the City Downland Estate as a whole. For example, many actions will help directly or indirectly to increase biodiversity and achieve the council’s net zero target.

### **4. Analysis and consideration of alternative options**

- 4.1 As a landowner within the South Downs National Park, the council were obligated to produce a Whole Estate Plan. By doing so, we have grasped an opportunity to refresh our existing policy and co-create a new one based on the community consultation. The plan is coherent across all council directorates, incorporating and supporting other key council policies (e.g. Carbon Neutral 2030) and is supported by the SDNPA.
- 4.2 By not producing the CDEP these benefits will not be fully realised and in addition, there would be reputational damage to the council which could lead to further issues with managing the downland estate.

### **5. Community engagement and consultation**

- 5.1 The Downland Estate is an asset for all the residents of Brighton & Hove. It was therefore imperative that the foundation for the plan was built upon understanding what residents value about the estate and how they envisage its future. It was also acknowledged that there is vast knowledge and experience held within partner organisations and interested groups. This has been tapped into through the develop of the plan and continues to improve its chances of success.
- 5.2 Community engagement specialists Planning For Real were procured in Mid 2020 to build a plan for consultation that would be accessible for all residents, encouraging new and previously hard to reach people to engage with the process. The SDNPA guidance on producing Whole Estate Plans was used to structure, stimulate and guide the conversations, creating four themes, each with sub-topics. The four themes were 'Natural Systems', 'Land Use & Management', 'Climate Change' and 'Cultural'.
- 5.3 Following the Planning For Real model an initial range of events were planned to gather information on what our residents valued about the Downland Estate, and where weaknesses/improvements were required. Due to the constraints of the pandemic in 2020, the decision was taken to hold all these events online, in order to give the assurance that the process could move forwards.
- 5.4 In addition to the Planning For Real process, an online portal was created, plus an interactive webpage accessible through the council's 'Climate Conversations' was set up to all those interested in the Downland Estate to discuss issues/ideas, share knowledge and work, and to provide detailed written submissions. All these methods of engagement were designed to dovetail with the main Planning For Real process, so that as much data as possible could be collated as part of the First Public consultation.
- 5.5 A communications plan was devised to launch the first public consultation and to raise awareness of the Estate. Flyers were delivered to every household within Brighton & Hove, alongside adverts in local newspapers, posters and a social media campaign. The Trust for Developing Communities (TDC) and BHCC Equalities team helped to create links with our minority groups, and the consultation was subsequently promoted through these groups/channels, via emails/posters/facebook pages.
- 5.6 Demand for the planned online sessions was high, leading to an additional two sessions being added to the programme in February 2021. In total, over 550 people attended the initial online sessions. Feedback from Planning For Real was that these numbers were well in excess of previous consultations they had held, and that the ability for people to join from their homes had led to the high numbers. The main challenge in the sessions was to make the conversations relevant and useful for those with a detailed knowledge and experience of the Downland Estate, and also accessible and welcoming for those with no prior knowledge.
- 5.7 Meetings with key stakeholder groups associated with the council's Downland Estate - representatives from community groups, statutory

organisations, farm tenants, councillors & officers throughout the first stage of the public consultation were held to allow key voices additional time and opportunity to add comments and ideas to the process. In April 2021, a 'carousel' final session was arranged for officers / councillors / interested groups / statutory and partner organisations and residents to review all the ideas/opinions collated from the different channels. The group worked collectively to consider the data and created a set of aims and objectives for the plan along with four proposed Visions. This represented the last stage in the Planning For Real process.

- 5.8 The City Downland Estate Advisory Panel (known as the Downland Advisory Panel DAP) and terms of reference were approved at Council in May 2021 as a member working group to exist alongside the Asset Member Board (AMB) to provide a dedicated forum for considering relevant issues and advice on the CDEP. The DAP is a partnership body which includes both Council members and external organisations including representatives from farm tenants, community groups and statutory organisations. Membership can be reviewed annually, could change over time to ensure a range of voices are heard and specialist advice will be called upon as and when necessary, depending on the subject matter. The DAP will report to the AMB on advice regarding the implementation of the CDEP.
- 5.9 In July 2021, all BHCC councillors were invited to a session to review the four Visions put forward in the Planning For Real process, and to help combine and hone these into one Vision for the City Downland Estate. The first draft CDEP was then created, using both the agreed Vision and the aims and objectives put forward in the First Stage of the Public consultation (Planning For Real process). Officers from across BHCC with roles based within, or touching upon, the Downland Estate were invited to help shape this draft.
- 5.10 This draft was then presented to the Asset Management Board (AMB) and the Downland Advisory Panel (DAP), for them to review in December 2021/January 2022 and provide feedback. This produced over 100 pages of ideas/suggestions/amendments, all of which was considered by the project team and fed into the process of creating the next draft. Where key resolutions were identified by the DAP, these were presented to the AMB for discussion and resolution.
- 5.11 In March 2022 the SDNPA received the updated draft for their members first consultation. The CDEP project team met with SDNPA members in mid March and feedback from this consultation was provided in early April 2022. The draft Plan was updated with this feedback and presented to members in the AMB in late April for sign off for the second public consultation.
- 5.12 The second public consultation began in May 2022, with residents being asked to indicate levels of support for the elements within the Plan via a portal survey. This was heavily publicised through the DAP, our stakeholder distribution lists, social media and adverts in local publications. Once again,

colleagues in the BHCC Equalities team and the TDC provided support to promote the process to our minority and hard to reach groups.

- 5.13 In July 2022 the outcomes and responses of the second public consultation were collated and the draft updated to incorporate the feedback and presented to the AMB for comment. As part of the SDNPA consultation there was a tour of the Estate in June with SDNPA members, council officers, councillors, and a community representative after which the draft Plan was submitted to the SDNPA for their second members consultation in August 2022.
- 5.14 Feedback from SDNPA members and AMB was incorporated into the draft in September 2022, to form the final version of the CDEP. This was signed off by the AMB members on 1 November for presentation to this Committee.

## **6. Conclusion**

- 6.1 The City Downland Estate Plan being presented to this Committee has been created through an extensive public engagement process. The findings set out the vision, aims, objectives and ambition for the future of the Downland Estate. Over 60 actions have been identified and developed through the process broken down into short, medium and longer term timeframes with the initial actions contained in and the next steps section that has a 2 year timeline. The Plan findings have been built upon and developed through a partnership approach that enabled council officers and members to work alongside our key external stakeholders and residents to produce a plan which is well considered, and well supported.

## **7. Financial implications**

- 7.1 The City Downland Estate Plan covers substantial and diverse assets owned by the council and is supported by diverse services across the council. No one service area has overall budget responsibility for the estate as it covers farmlands to seafront chalets; parking to parks, albeit the agricultural estate managed by Property & Design represents the majority of the City Downland Estate. As such it is not possible to accurately separately identify all aspects of income and expenditure for the CDEP area; it is estimated that at present the overall income is over £1m, predominantly from the agricultural estate, which is more than offset by expenditure including estate management, City Parks services, including management of trees, and open spaces and rights of way.
- 7.2 The CDEP aspiration is to ringfence all new income for reinvestment in the CDEP area. This can only be achieved if there is a demonstrable increase in net income after allowing for costs, when compared with the income and expenditure the council already budgets for. The plan highlights opportunities for increasing income and attracting grant that could be used for capital or revenue reinvestment however any ringfencing of resources removes the council's flexibility to use new income sources to support the council's overall financial position i.e. budget gaps. It is therefore recommended that any proposed ringfencing of net additional capital or

revenue income is subject to a business case and approved by Policy and Resources Committee within a Targeted Budget Management (TBM) report or the annual progress report with decisions taken in the context of the council's overall financial position.

- 7.3 The CDEP includes the preparation and maintenance of a 2-5 year rolling capital investment programme. Any capital investment programme will need to identify how it will be resourced for example, from borrowing where new income streams are identified to fund the financing costs of debt; grants, or capital receipts from the sale of assets within the CDEP area.
- 7.4 The council has already approved a number of disposals of properties within the CDEP and set out plans for the receipts such as supporting Stanmer traditional agricultural buildings and corporate net receipt targets. The adoption of this plan does not override those previous decisions however any new disposals over and above those already agreed for disposal within the CDEP area could be ringfenced for reinvestment subject to a business case. As with new income streams, any ringfencing of capital receipts reduces the council's flexibility to apply capital receipts more generally to support the council's overall financial position.

Name of finance officer consulted: James Hengeveld Date consulted: 07/11/22

## **8. Legal implications**

- 8.1 There are a number of actions set out in the City Downland Estate Plan. Many will have legal implications which will need to be considered as those actions are delivered. The Asset Management Board (AMB) is an advisory board to Policy & Resources Committee.

Name of lawyer consulted: Alice Rowland Date consulted: 7/11/22

## **9. Equalities implications**

- 9.1 The CDEP is built on the foundation of engagement with the residents of Brighton & Hove and raising awareness this, via the council, the estate belongs to all our residents. The council is committed to engagement with the DAP and to ensuring that a community voice is included in this group. The BHCC Equalities team will be invited to DAP meetings, and we will also work closely with the Trust for Developing Communities to both represent community groups and to also identify when individual groups could be closely involved in the development of projects.
- 9.2 The action 'An Amenity For All' sets out how we will ensure that all our residents benefit from the downland estate, with a focus on developing ways that access can be improved for specific groups, such as wheelchair users.
- 9.3 The plan acknowledges the need to raise awareness of what the estate has to offer, with a focus on reaching out to groups within our community that

have historically either not been involved in groups engaging with the Downland Estate or accessed the myriad of benefits that it offers. The council will work closely with the TDC to refine how best to reach out and involve these groups, to ensure that the commitment in the vision that “this land is ours” is meaningful for all our residents.

## **10. Sustainability implications**

- 10.1 Sustainability is a pillar upon which the City Downland Estate Plan is built, with significant sections in the Vision dedicated to elements such as enhanced biodiversity, the estate becoming carbon negative, climate resilient, sustainable farming and local food production. Each of these with the opportunity to create city-wide benefits, and beyond.
- 10.2 The plan will dovetail with Carbon Neutral 2030, in areas such as sustainable travel (better access for walkers/cyclists), local food production, supporting farmers to move to a sustainable methods of farming and increased opportunities to create renewable sources of energy.
- 10.3 The protection of the aquifer is a key action for the plan, and we will work in partnership with The Aquifer Partnership (TAP), Southern Water and our tenant farmers to create a groundwater storage and catchment strategy.
- 10.4 The CDEP has specific actions around promoting local food production and reducing food miles and how we will work with local organisations such as the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership to reach these goals.
- 10.5 An audit of all estate activities and buildings will be conducted to define future energy requirements and we will identify and implement energy-saving measures to meet and future-proof EPC requirements.
- 10.6 The CDEP acknowledges shared objectives with the Living Coast and a commitment to work in close partnership to achieve these.

## **11. Other Implications**

### **Social Value and procurement implications**

- 11.1 Social value is at the heart of the CDEP, with the Vision setting out how an enhanced downland estate will have positive impacts on all residents. Be that through enhanced biodiversity, increased access to the landscape and the clear links this has to wellbeing, sustainable farming and opportunities for local food production, protection of the city’s water supply and how the estate can assist with the mitigating the effects of climate change.

### **Public health implications:**

- 11.2 The CDEP recognises the wealth of opportunities that the estate can offer residents to improve health and wellbeing and sets out actions that will develop these opportunities and give more people the ability to access these. The plan seeks to increase the opportunities for existing walkers and



cyclists to be able to reach and enjoy the downland estate, plus set out actions that will encourage all our residents to access the health benefits of being amongst nature.

- 11.3 The action 'An Amenity for All' sets out how access both to, and within, the estate will be improved to attract visitors and engage residents through leisure, events that celebrate the downs and the growing of food. It also identifies the importance of raising the profile of the estate and encouraging residents that have not historically engaged or accessed the downs to explore all that it has to offer. We will work closely with schools and outreach programmes to achieve this.
- 11.4 The CDEP will benchmark the natural assets held by the estate to both protect and enhance them. Many of these natural assets are what creates an environment which makes being within the estate beneficial for wellbeing and attractive for leisure activities. The plan will secure and improve this environment for future generations.

## **Supporting Documentation**

### **1. Appendices**

- Appendix 1 The City Downland Estate Plan (full)
- Appendix 2 The City Downland Estate Plan Summary

