

Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Strategy Review November 2022

Dolphin Ecological Surveys
on behalf of
Hastings Borough Council

Dolphin Ecological Surveys, Edgedown, Kammond Avenue, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 3JL

01323 304180

info@ecodolphin.co.uk

CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction	p.2
2.0 The First Management Strategy	p.2
2.1 Key Points from the Strategy Report	p.3
3.0 Achievements Since 2000	p.3
3.1 Reserve Funding	p.4
3.2 Reserve Management Structure	p.5
3.3 Management Planning	p.5
3.4 Creative & Innovative Solutions	p.6
3.5 Partnerships	p.6
4.0 A Strategy for the Future	p.7
4.1 Funding	p.8
4.2 Key Funding Risks	p.9
4.3 Mitigating Funding Risks	p.9
4.4 Reserve Management Structure	p.10
4.4.1 In-house vs Outsourcing Control	p.10
4.4.2 Reserve Management Hierarchy & Staffing	p.10
4.4.3 Partnerships	p.11
4.5 Key Reserve Management Structure Risks	p.12
4.6 Mitigating Reserve Management Structure Risks	p.12
5.0 Recommendations	p.13
6.0 Timeline for the CS Application & Reserve Management Structure Review	p.14

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The first management strategy report for the Hastings Country Park was prepared in 2000 by independent ecologist Kate Ryland on behalf of Hastings Borough Council. The same author carried out the current strategy review.

This review looks back on 22 years of progress, and forward to how management of the Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve could be structured and delivered in the future.

This review comprises;

- A brief recap of key points from the original management strategy report.
- A review of some outstanding achievements at the Country Park nature reserve.
- An outline strategy for the future that builds on progress made over the last 22 years. Key risks to the Council are identified as well as suggestions for ways to mitigate those risks.

2.0 THE FIRST MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Twenty-two years ago Hastings Borough Council (HBC) faced some difficult decisions over the future of their largest landholding, 850 acres (345ha) on the cliffs above the town at Fairlight.

Most of the site comprised a popular Country Park that lay within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) of very high ecological and geological importance but which had no formal management plan.

Then, as now, Council resources for land management were limited. The special coastal heath and acid grassland vegetation of the Firehills was vanishing under dense stands of Gorse and Bracken whilst information about the fauna and flora of the gill woodland, sea cliffs, coastal heath, sandstone outcrops and acid grassland was patchy and incomplete.

The remainder of the site was Fairlight Place Farm, a tenanted and intensively managed dairy farm which had a long history of allowing slurry and polluted water to run off the farm into the Country Park. For decades pollution from the farm had been affecting watercourses and sensitive habitats within the SSSI, causing ongoing conflict between the Council and the tenant.

By 2000, English Nature (now Natural England) and the Environment Agency were on the verge of taking legal action against the Council over its failure to address the chronic pollution from the farm. As custodian of an internationally important wildlife site, HBC needed to find a new approach that would resolve the long-standing conflicts and enable it to meet its statutory obligations.

Together with English Nature, the Council commissioned an independent ecologist to prepare a management strategy report. The aim was to provide Councillors with an objective overview of current threats to the site and to present a series of options and recommendations for a way forward.

The strategy report made it clear that long-standing conflicts between the Council and tenant were unlikely to be resolved whilst the land was farmed intensively for dairy production. It called for Councillors to make

significant, informed and bold decisions that would resolve a difficult and unsatisfactory situation in order to secure a more positive and sustainable future for the Country Park and the farmland.

2.1 Key Points from the Strategy Report

- The primary recommendation was that HBC should end the farm tenancy, take the farmland back in-hand and move towards a more integrated and sustainable management model, encompassing both the Country Park and the farmland.
- Grant aid should be sought from agri-environment schemes to support a more extensive farming system combining conservation grazing and some arable production.
- The Country Park should be declared a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). This would emphasise its ecological importance, prompt the formation of a steering group to oversee its management and potentially attract grant aid.
- Options for a new management structure included using in-house resources or a partnership/lease agreement with an external conservation body.
- A five-year management plan to guide work across the whole site was essential.
- A formal programme of biological surveys and monitoring was needed to support much greater focus on the scientific importance and biodiversity value of the Country Park.
- Research and educational opportunities on the site were under-exploited and there was a need for a new visitor centre.
- Maximising the Natural Capital value of the Country Park was seen as a fundamental part of future decision making.

The 2000 Management Strategy report concluded that the Council had a unique opportunity to bring together management of the Country Park and Fairlight Place Farm under a new management model.

The enlarged Country Park Local Nature Reserve could be used to demonstrate best practice management by a local authority on a SSSI (and potential SAC) for nature conservation, sustainability and people.

Using this model, the Council could meet its legal obligations and its moral duties by safeguarding and enhancing an irreplaceable part of the natural heritage of Hastings on behalf of the local community.

3.0 ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE 2000

In 2000 Councillors made a series of significant and bold decisions which paved the way for an extraordinary project to take shape. The first, and perhaps the most courageous, decision was to terminate the farm tenancy and consolidate all the HBC land into a single Local Nature Reserve.

This major shift in direction allowed all the key recommendations from the strategy report to be taken forward. Over the years the combined landholding that is now Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve has been transformed from its previous state as degraded farmland and semi-natural habitats blighted by invasive

species. The progress that has been made towards restoring biodiversity and thriving ecosystems across the reserve through sustainable management is outstanding.

The most recent Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve Management Plan covers the period from 2020 to 2030. It is a comprehensive document that sets out strategic and habitat management objectives for the reserve and describes in some detail the work that has been carried out since 2000 to restore biodiversity on the farmland and semi-natural habitats on the reserve.

Invasive species control has been a fundamental part of restoration management, particularly large-scale removal of Gorse scrub and Bracken to restore coastal heathland, acid grassland and bare ground habitats. Conservation grazing with free-roaming, native breed cattle and Exmoor ponies has been enormously successful in sustaining and enhancing the mosaic of habitats on the clifftops.

Water quality in the fragile gill woodland habitats has improved immensely now that the chronic farm pollution has ended, allowing rare mosses, ferns, liverworts and invertebrates to thrive. The retained arable fields are managed by an arable contractor, much less intensively than in the past, with uncropped wildflower margins and areas sown specifically to support pollinating insects.

The long-term programme of biological surveys and monitoring has shown that the reserve supports high levels of biodiversity including a multitude of rare and threatened species, important invertebrate assemblages, diverse breeding bird populations.

The wildlife and habitats of the Country Park nature reserve are now thriving whilst at the same time it remains an extremely popular amenity resource, providing all the public health benefits that access to nature and opportunities for volunteering can offer.

There is a robust reserve management structure in place, supported by agreed habitat management plans for heathland, grassland, scrub arable areas and grazing, which are updated every five years. Funding for reserve management has been secured via grant aid from a Countryside Stewardship agreement.

More than two decades of hard work have resulted in an award-winning nature reserve, a recipient of the Green Flag award every year since 2006. Some of the most imaginative and innovative management practices introduced by HBC on the reserve have informed and inspired other landowners and local authorities, many of whom face the same challenges of limited resources, conflicting demands on their open spaces and the legal obligations of good land stewardship on protected sites.

Since 2000 there has been a cascade of successful outcomes at the Hastings Country Park nature reserve, for biodiversity, sustainability, good practice management, public health and visitor enjoyment. These have only been possible through the sustained support of dedicated HBC staff, Councillors, external partners and volunteers.

3.1 Reserve Funding

- HBC allocated significant capital sums to renovate the old Fairlight Place Farm buildings into the management hub that is in place today.

- The primary source of funding to manage the reserve has been Countryside Stewardship and Higher-Level Stewardship agreements. These have provided the financial support for extensive landscape and site management changes over the last two decades.
- HBC core revenue funding has focused staff resources at the reserve through the Environment and Natural Resources Manager and other posts within the parks service.
- The Council has been very successful in attracting grants and new funding streams from the High Weald Unit, Natural England (NE), DEFRA and others, to support management and improvements on the reserve.

3.2 Reserve Management Structure

- Strategic guidance for the reserve is provided by a cross-party, Councillor-led Management Forum. The Forum includes Councillors, Council officers and representatives of Natural England, Groundwork South and the Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve.
- Strategic and operational management of the Country Park is coordinated by the Environment and Natural Resources Manager from the on-site management hub.
- An independent agricultural/Stewardship adviser is contracted by HBC to provide management advice, agri-environment scheme administration and compliance monitoring. The adviser's remit also includes liaising between HBC, the grazier and the arable contractor over management along with regular on-site monitoring.
- Operational management follows a strategic management plan for the whole site. This runs in parallel with detailed management plans for individual semi-natural habitats and the arable land.
- External partners and contractors deliver specialist management services for conservation grazing, grounds maintenance and arable production on different parts of the reserve.

3.3 Management Planning

- Initially five-year management plans were prepared for the Country Park nature reserve.
- The current ten-year reserve management plan (covering the period 2020-2030) is a strategic, guiding document that also contains information about habitats and key species.
- Individual five-year habitat management plans set out in more detail prescriptions for the extensive grazing on coastal heath, invasive species control, pasture restoration and areas where natural processes and minimal intervention will be most beneficial.
- A programme of annual wildlife surveys and monitoring provides robust, scientific evidence to support land management decisions. Over the years these surveys have revealed just how many extraordinary and uncommon species inhabit the reserve.

- The commitment to increase the sustainability of management across the reserve is driving a move away from maintaining the farmed, arable habitats towards creating much lower input wood pasture habitat that can be sustained by a combination of extensive conservation grazing and natural processes.

3.4 Creative & Innovative Solutions

- Conservation grazing to drive habitat management and landscape restoration is now a core feature of management at the Country Park.
- In partnership with a local grazier, HBC has acquired their own Exmoor ponies and Belted Galloway cattle. Grazing by these hardy animals since 2006 has promoted the recovery and restoration of precious areas of acid grassland and heathland vegetation in parts the Country Park .
- The No Fence virtual pasture system is an exciting recent innovation in the grazing programme. This ground-breaking and high tech solution allows cattle grazing where any kind of physical fence is impractical or inappropriate.
- The success and flexibility of the No Fence system at the Country Park reserve is already generating interest from other site managers. HBC is able to demonstrate how this new technological solution works in practice on land with public access. Sharing knowledge of this kind has important implications for conservation grazing schemes across the region and enhances the reputation of HBC as a land manager.
- A popular innovation has been to deploy heavy horses rather than tractors to tackle the dense, encroaching Bracken on steep and inaccessible slopes in the reserve. Using horses minimises adverse impacts on thin, fragile soils and allows the public to watch these charismatic animals carrying out vital habitat management.
- In an inspired use of the farm’s old silage clamps, a green waste composting facility has been built at the management hub. Creating in-house facilities to process green waste that is generated on the reserve increases sustainability and reduces the cost of “cut and collect” grassland management. Green waste from grounds maintenance work elsewhere in the Borough can also be recycled here, leading to a further cost saving for HBC.

3.5 Partnerships

- HBC has been extremely fortunate to cultivate an unusual and very successful partnership with a local farmer/grazier. Most councils face significant costs for conservation grazing on nature reserves but this partnership comes at no material cost to HBC.
- Working with a partner who is sympathetic to HBC management aims and is responsive to changing circumstances has been crucial to the success of the conservation grazing scheme at the reserve.
- A newly formed partnership with the charity Groundwork Trust South led to the completion of a low carbon, sustainably built, hay bale visitor centre for the Country Park reserve in 2022. Another landmark achievement that fulfils a recommendation made in 2000.

- The new visitor centre and café will act as an important focus for visitors to the reserve. Groundwork South will continue working with the Friends of Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve and volunteers, helping to engage the local community and allowing them to feel part of the site's future.

The Country Park is cherished by local people, and visitors from further afield, for its health and well-being benefits as well as for its extraordinary wildlife and landscape. Precisely because it means so much to so many people there will always be conflicting views on how it should be managed.

With backing from Natural England, the members of the Management Forum, together with dedicated HBC staff and partners, will undoubtedly continue to navigate these difficulties using the skill and sensitivity they have displayed so successfully to date.

The Hastings Country Park Management Forum has set out an ambitious vision in the 2020-2030 management plan;

"...to have the best managed and accessible coastal nature reserve in South East England; recognising and enhancing its biodiversity importance and its significance within the cultural and historic landscape of the town".

This level of confidence in the future of the Country Park nature reserve would have been inconceivable in 2000, yet in 2022 such an outcome seems entirely achievable.

4.0 A STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

Since the Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve project began in 2000, HBC has pushed boundaries and led by example in their creation and management of the reserve. Their approach has generated high profile benefits and plaudits for Hastings.

Locally, regionally and nationally there are continued and intensifying threats to natural habitats and wildlife, along with rising demand for access to nature. The Hastings Country Park reserve is an invaluable local asset that can, and does, deliver immense benefits for wildlife and for people.

Safeguarding biodiversity on the reserve will continue to be a challenge in the face of major upcoming changes, resulting in particular from government policy and the climate emergency. Meeting this challenge requires increased long-term sustainability of reserve management as a matter of urgency.

Grant aid from the next Stewardship agreement will support proposals to convert the retained farmland (arable) habitats into wood pasture. The structurally complex vegetation of wood pasture can be rich in wildlife whilst requiring much less management input than arable areas demand.

Ultimately more parts of the reserve could be managed by extensive conservation grazing with hardy, native herbivores to promote structurally complex vegetation mosaics and provide the diverse conditions needed to sustain and enhance high levels of biodiversity.

This strategy review suggests ways for the Council to strengthen the reserve management structure, to ensure that it is fit for the future and that it meets the Council's statutory obligations at the reserve whilst continuing to support ongoing, award-winning work.

There are some risks the Council should be fully aware of when considering the next steps and priorities for management of the reserve. These risks are outlined along with suggestions for how they can be mitigated.

A future reserve management strategy can be separated into 2 broad elements:

1. Funding
2. Reserve Management Structure

4.1 Funding

- The current Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement expires in November 2023.
- Clarity over funding is fundamental to successful management of this highly designated and popular public open space. The Council's top priority for Hastings Country Park nature reserve should be to secure on-going financial support for the reserve through appropriate government grants.
- Being able to call on the services of an independent agricultural/Stewardship adviser who can help to secure funding and guide management of the reserve has been critical to the Council's successful management model.
- A vital part of this highly skilled and specialised role is to steer the Council through the grant application processes and to liaise with Natural England (who oversee and monitor the Countryside Stewardship grant) on behalf of the Council.
- The Council will need to submit a new Countryside Stewardship application in April 2023 for a five-year agreement to start on 1st January 2024. The focus of this should be on extending conservation grazing throughout the reserve with a move away from maintaining arable habitats.
- Once the terms of a new Countryside Stewardship grant are available, discussions with the grazier should take place over extending the partnership into the new grant period and building on its success.
- Current uncertainty and changes in UK agricultural policy and grant aid will have a direct impact on the nature and level of funding available for the reserve. The Council will continue to need expert advice on how to take maximum advantage of the changing situation.
- For future grant applications, the Council will need to decide whether to extend the Countryside Stewardship grant for a further five years or transfer to its proposed successor the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS).
- At present full details of ELMS are sketchy, but there should be more clarity about its payments and management priorities before the five-year CS agreement is due to expire. ELMS may provide a longer term, ten-year, financial management grant.
- The independent adviser may be able to seek additional grant aid from bodies such as the High Weald Unit and Natural England. This is in addition to overseeing the new grant application, joining discussions with the grazier and steering the Council through the implementation of a Stewardship grant.

- Other ways to generate funds to support management of the reserve should be explored. For example, revenue from film companies using the reserve for location work, marketing meat and other products from the conservation grazing operation, provision of training courses and educational opportunities related to the special features of the reserve.

4.2 Key Funding Risks

- Crucially, the 2023 grant application round in the UK is the last opportunity for sites to enter the Countryside Stewardship scheme until the forthcoming Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS) is rolled out.
- **There is currently no date for the implementation of ELMS across the UK.**
- If the Council were to miss the April 2023 deadline for a Countryside Stewardship application, there will be a significant funding gap that could, potentially, be several years.
- Transition to the new grant in 2024 is not a formality. Countryside Stewardship is a competitive scheme which requires Natural England to scrutinise every application. To be successful, the Council must demonstrate to NE that it has the necessary capacity and a robust reserve management structure in place to manage the site and the new grant.
- NE can delay the implementation date of a new agreement (currently January 2024) if they feel there is an inadequate reserve management structure, or the Council cannot fully demonstrate its capacity to deliver the new scheme. Delays would leave the Council with no grant or budget to manage the site when the current grant ends in November 2023. As management of the site depends on external grant aid, this would be a completely unacceptable position for the Council.
- NE also has the authority to rescind the agreement at any time if they feel the grant is not delivering its objectives or that the Council no longer has adequate capacity to manage the scheme and its priorities. Cancellation of the scheme part way through would require the Council to return all funds received from the start of its new grant.
- Reserve management will simplify over time under current proposals. Without the complexities of arable production the entire site will become a naturally regenerating landscape where grazing animals move around to fulfil ecological priorities. The next grant application will be in 2027 or thereabouts and will need to reflect this progression. At that time the Council will require relevant expertise to help submit a new grant application or transfer to ELMS.

4.3 Mitigating Funding Risks

- The immediate priority is for the Stewardship adviser and HBC senior management to apply for the Countryside Stewardship grant by April 2023, aiming for a January 2024 start.
- Strong engagement with NE by the Council's stewardship adviser and HBC senior management will ensure the Council maximises grant income and is able to meet all necessary grant objectives.

- **It is considered essential that the independent agricultural/Stewardship adviser role should be retained as part of the future reserve management strategy.**

4.4 Reserve Management Structure

Alongside a secure financial basis, the bedrocks of the current, successful reserve management structure are the officers, partners and volunteers that support it. Their importance cannot be over-emphasised.

The Country Park nature reserve project has benefited from an unusually high level of continuity in key personnel since 2000. Notably the Environment and Natural Resources Manager (originally the Borough Ecologist) has been in post for the entire life of the project so far, which has undoubtedly played a significant part in its smooth-running.

It is self-evident that the current reserve management model has been very successful to date, but in changing and uncertain times the need is greater than ever for a clear and robust reserve management structure, underpinned with sufficient funding.

4.4.1 In-house vs Outsourcing Control

- At various points in the site's history, outsourcing reserve management to a third-party organisation has been considered (for example RSPB, National Trust or Sussex Wildlife Trust). Discussions have failed to identify significant benefits for the Council and most recently a potential partner unexpectedly withdrew from such a conversation for external reasons.
- In-house control of reserve management allows faster decision-making and gives greatest flexibility to respond quickly to changing circumstances and opportunities.
- In-house control also allows the Council to retain the entire Stewardship grant to use for its best advantage at the site.
- Over many years the Council has shown itself to be a very successful reserve manager. It is difficult at this stage to identify any material benefits that would accrue from outsourcing management of the reserve.
- Retaining the current model of in-house control of almost all aspects of management on one of the Borough's most important natural assets seems to be a very good fit with overall Council policy. There is clearly an opportunity to link management of the reserve to the new in-house grounds maintenance provision.

4.4.2 Reserve Management Hierarchy & Staffing

- The simplest option is to build on the current highly successful model; a strategic management board, a key officer post and strong partnerships which are supported by grant aid.
- The Councillor-led Management Forum is well-established and provides strategic guidance. It may be appropriate to review its terms of reference to ensure they are fit for purpose to meet future management priorities at the reserve.

- The absence of a Ranger or site-based member of staff is a surprising gap in the current management structure of the reserve. Many large, public access nature reserves depend on highly visible, site-based Rangers, particularly where conservation grazing and amenity uses can sometimes generate conflict.
- Presence of an on-site HBC Ranger is seen as an essential reinforcement of the reserve management structure, with the additional benefit of providing a public face of the Council in one of the most popular open spaces in the Borough. At present there is no clear pathway for visitors to report incidents or voice their concerns at the Country Park. This could result in a slower response time to serious emergencies, such as fires or accidents.
- Funding for a Ranger post could potentially be derived from a combination of HBC core funding and the Stewardship grant.
- **Consideration should be given to strengthening the reserve management structure with a new on-site Ranger post. This role would combine nature conservation, partner liaison and community engagement skills. It would allow a fast response to on-site problems with the potential to nip conflicts in the bud.**

4.4.3 Partnerships

- The Council should endeavour to retain and build upon the strong partnerships it has with contractors and volunteers.
- Strong partnership working has allowed the successful delivery of sometimes complex and specialist reserve management. For example, graziers will generally charge a rate per head of livestock for conservation grazing and Councils can expect to pay significant sums to implement conservation grazing projects. The current grazing partnership is highly unusual and beneficial to HBC because it allows the Council to have grazing on its land at no cost.
- The Council benefits from an excellent working relationship with the local farmer/grazier who provides the conservation grazing service for the reserve. The grazer is engaged, knowledgeable and, most importantly, highly responsive to HBC requirements. This very successful partnership is fundamental to the success of the conservation grazing project and its value must not be underestimated.
- Once the terms of the new Countryside Stewardship grant are available, high priority must be given to holding discussions with the grazer over how to extend the partnership into the new grant period and the potential to build on its success. For example, acquiring a small number of extra cattle of a different hardy breed to the current Belted Galloways could increase the flexibility of the grazing regime on the reserve.
- It may be possible to develop a market for meat from the conservation herd as part of the existing farming partnership. Adding value to conservation grazing projects in this way has been very successful at other high profile wildlife sites (for example Ashdown Forest and the Knepp Wildlands) where sustainably produced, local origin food has found a ready market.
- An exciting new partnership has been forged between HBC and the local Groundwork Trust during construction of the Bale Barn visitor centre. This partnership should be extended to develop the

volunteering, training, community events and educational opportunities that the Country Park reserve offers.

4.5 Key Reserve Management Structure Risks

- Outsourcing management to a third-part organisation carries the risk of leaving the Council without a fully robust reserve management structure in place should the partnership fail.
- A major risk for the Council is that the agricultural/Stewardship adviser is an external consultant and could therefore leave at any time. This specialist role requires a suitably skilled and experienced individual to advise on the Countryside Stewardship grant application process and provide guidance on the practicalities of conservation grazing, biodiversity and farming. High quality guidance from an independent adviser to the Council is an essential part of the management structure.
- Another major risk to the Council is a breakdown of the mutually beneficial partnership with the current farmer/grazier. Successful management of the reserve in the long term requires extended conservation grazing, supported by a new Stewardship grant. This is entirely dependent on continuation of the shared trust, commitment and on-site engagement between the grazier, the Council's Stewardship adviser and HBC staff.
- Should the current grazier lose confidence and terminate their involvement at the reserve it would place significant risk on the Council's ability to fulfil its obligations under a Stewardship agreement. This in turn could result in either termination of the grant or incurring significant costs to pay others to graze the land (currently achieved at no cost to the Council).
- If the focus for reserve management decisions is no longer the HBC Environment and Natural Resources Manager post, there must be sufficient handover time to another member of staff. This will avoid the loss of two decades of expertise and experience built up by the incumbent, along with valuable continuity within the Council.

4.6 Mitigating Reserve Management Structure Risks

- The Council should plan carefully for the transition to a revised, in-house reserve management structure that will ensure its strategic aims for the reserve continue to be met in future.
- The Council must be able to demonstrate to Natural England that it has the capacity to manage any new grant and fulfil its statutory management obligations to the SSSI.
- The focus of a new Countryside Stewardship grant will be on conservation grazing, therefore the Council must also be able to reassure NE that it has strong grazing partnerships in place and adequate on-site management structures.
- The grazier and the Stewardship adviser are external partners and consultants to HBC. The Council should take steps through positive engagement to ensure, as far as possible, that they are part of the longer-term future of the reserve. There should be a contingency plan in place should either of these key partners decide to leave. How the Council would deal with that scenario is beyond the scope of this report.

- A newly defined, site-based Ranger post at the reserve could provide the necessary levels of reassurance to Natural England that the Council has the capability to implement the terms of Stewardship and land management grants. It would also reassure the Council that its on-site activities comply with its statutory obligations and the legal obligations of any grants it receives.
- A site-based Ranger post, responsible for reserve management, would help to mitigate future loss of the Environment and Natural Resources Manager role. A suitable period of transition between these posts would ensure knowledge and skills could be passed on.
- An on-site Ranger could play a pivotal role between the Council and its partners including the Stewardship adviser, the grazier, Groundwork, the Friends, volunteers and the public.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this strategy review it is recommended that HBC should:

- Agree and adopt the timetable for submitting a new Countryside Stewardship agreement application by April 2023 as an urgent priority.
- Strengthens the existing, successful model of an essentially in-house reserve management structure with strategic direction provided by a Management Forum and aligned with a more unified Council service.
- Agree the process and timetable for a transition to a strengthened reserve management structure as a priority.
- Recognise and value the crucial roles played by the independent agricultural/Stewardship adviser and the grazier as central to the success of future reserve management.
- Create a new on-site Ranger post to meet multiple objectives at this very high profile site. Such a post would complement the strategic direction of in-house management and service provision at HBC.

Since 2000 there have been innovative and inspirational outcomes for wildlife and for people at Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve. This should be a source of immense pride for all those who have been involved in this project over the last two decades.

By building on this success the vision of the Management Forum to have the best managed and most accessible coastal nature reserve in South East England is surely within reach.

6.0 Countryside Stewardship Application Timeline & Review of Reserve Management Structure

WHAT	WHEN	WHO
Countryside Stewardship grant drafted, discussed & agreed with Natural England	Aug - Dec 2022	HBC Stewardship adviser/HBC
Consideration of future management structure & potential for a new on-site Ranger post	September 2022 - March 2023	HBC
HBC corporate decision on future grant aid	By December 2022	HBC
Draft application finalised with NE	December 2022-March 2023	HBC Stewardship adviser
New Countryside Stewardship application submitted	April 2023	HBC Stewardship adviser
Current Higher-Level Stewardship ends	November 2023	HBC
New Countryside Stewardship grant starts	1 st January 2024	HBC
New management structure in place	31 st March 2024	HBC