

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee - Friday 15 January 2021

Protecting Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for Future Generations

Recommendations

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Notes the content of the report and offers any further comment which will be reported to Cabinet to consider in the context of the proposals.

Report of Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities

Summary

What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

1. Proposals to protect Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) from the impacts of increasing recreational pressure were presented to Select Committee in November 2020. At the meeting, it was resolved that (a) the Select Committee accept the need for mitigating action to protect the SAC but mindful of the frustration of some user groups, ask the Cabinet Member to look again at the consultation which has taken place (by the SAC) and reconsider whether it was sufficiently robust and inclusive, particularly regarding car parking, and (b) The Cabinet Member report back to the Select Committee in the New Year.
2. The Cabinet Member has looked again at the consultation and this report outlines the findings and recommendations from this process. The proposals are due to be considered by Cabinet later in January and any further comments from Select Committee will be reported to Cabinet at its meeting for it to consider in the context of the proposals.
3. As previously discussed at Select Committee, the increased recreational pressure predicted over coming years presents a significant threat to protected habitats and associated wildlife. As owners of over 90% of the Special Area of Conservation, SCC has a legal duty for the protection and management of the site. Achieving the essential stewardship of the land, while enabling more people to visit and enjoy it requires careful balance and compromise. The SAC proposals seek to provide this balance.

Report

Background

4. Proposals to protect Cannock Chase SAC from the impacts of increasing recreational pressure associated with housing growth were presented to the committee on 12th November 2020. The proposals were commissioned by the Cannock Chase SAC Partnership. They extend across the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, encompassing multiple landownerships. The County Council is considering them in relation to their implementation on its landholding at Cannock Chase Country Park, which includes much of the most highly protected and sensitive area.
5. The proposals include a car parking plan and a site user plan, with changes proposed that will improve access infrastructure and capacity overall, and seek to reduce recreational pressure in the most sensitive environmental areas while increasing capacity in less sensitive areas which are more robust.

Consultation

6. Mindful of the frustration of some user groups, the Cabinet Member was asked to look again at the consultation undertaken by the SAC Partnership and reconsider whether it was sufficiently robust and inclusive, particularly regarding car parking.
7. Following Select Committee, the Cabinet Member has reviewed the consultation which was completed by the SAC Partnership as part of the development of the proposals and has had a number of conversations with the organisations involved. From this review, it is noted that:
 - a. A significant and robust evidence base supports the proposals and provides a strong rationale for the suggested measures;
 - b. The SAC Partnership held discussions with key stakeholders, including user group representatives, as the implementation plans were being developed, including workshops and presentations for relevant bodies.
 - c. In 2018, as part of the development of the plans, a series of questions about potential measures to protect the SAC were included in the visitor survey. This included 520 hours of interviews with visitors on site at 20 different locations across the area. Surveyors approached 1325 people (or groups of people) of which 988 people / groups of people agreed to take part (average group size was 1.9). In addition to questions about their visit, people were asked to rate a range of potential measures to protect the site. This included dog bins, enforcement in relation to dog fouling and having dogs on leads in the summer, marked routes, interpretation, increased warden presence, voluntary and compulsory car park charges and closure of some car parks. People's responses then helped shape the development of the implementation plans.
 - d. A public consultation was held for 6 weeks in late 2019. All relevant documents were made publicly available both online and in reception areas within the local authorities. The online survey was set up in such a way that people could select areas of interest – they did not therefore have to answer questions on areas they were not interested in. Car parking and car park charging were two distinct and clearly identified areas of the survey.
 - e. The consultation was advertised by the six local councils in the Partnership through their updates and social media. A press release was sent out to local media and a briefing note was created for council members. The consultation

featured in The Express and Star newspaper and other online media asking people to participate. E-mail circulars advertising the consultation were also sent to Parish councils and local interest groups who also advertised it on social media. Flyers and posters were put up around visitor centres. The consultation also featured on popular public groups and pages for Cannock Chase on Facebook.

- f. The County Council alerted people who had previously registered an interest in the management of Cannock Chase to the consultation (around 200 people).
 - g. 8169 visits were made to the consultation website. 6066 were unique views – meaning 6066 individual IP accounts visited the website. 408 responses were submitted which represented 130 individuals. The majority (88%) of respondents were individual site users. Most respondents were based local to Cannock Chase; Cannock, Hednesford, Rugeley, Milford, Stafford.
 - h. The responses from the visitor survey and the consultation shaped the proposals, with measures suggested within them to mitigate some of the impacts where measures were less well supported, e.g. annual permits at discounted rates for car parking etc.
8. In response to Select Committee's request, review of the documents and discussion with relevant partners provides confidence that the proposals have been developed based on robust evidence, that people have had an adequate opportunity to input to the proposals through their development and that their views have helped shape the resulting implementation plans.
9. The County Council, in its own consideration of the proposals and their implementation on SCC land, makes the following recommendations which further address and mitigate some of the impacts of chief concern:
- a. Car parking charges to be at modest levels, in line with current charges at Chasewater which includes and an annual permit currently at £36 for regular users;
 - b. Free parking for Blue Badge holders;
 - c. Retention of Brindley Village car park; retention of Campfield as a blue badge car park (for access to ToCH all ability trail);
 - d. Involvement of users in detail of key solutions – e.g. horse riders in parking provision for horse boxes etc.
 - e. Flexibility of implementation to take other management priorities and operational requirements into account.
10. The proposals include several areas where further work will be undertaken which will be subject to more detailed public consultation, two of which relate to SCC land:
- a. The options appraisal for Chase Road and the 22 parking areas along it;
 - b. The master plan for Marquis Drive.
11. The County Council will ensure, working with the SAC Partnership, that appropriate consultation processes are undertaken for these projects.
12. Furthermore, following discussions with the SAC Partnership, implementation of the wider proposals will include further public engagement as phases of implementation

are brought forward. This is a long-term plan which will be implemented over 15 years, therefore more timely opportunities to influence the detail of implementation will be important. The implementation plans will also be reviewed after five years to check progress and assess against monitoring information.

13. At its previous meeting, Select Committee heard from the Save Cannock Chase group regarding its concerns about the proposals and the consultation. The measures outlined above will help to address some of the concerns raised. It is clear that protecting Cannock Chase requires some changes that will be unpopular to some users. However, what has also become very clear is that there is equally strong support for the SAC proposals, both among the site users who have contacted the county council, and the environmental bodies that have an interest in the Chase and its wildlife. Public statements in support of the proposals have been made by the Cannock Chase AONB Partnership, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, West Midlands Bird Club, North Staffordshire Green Party and there is a local awareness raising campaign called 'For the love of Cannock Chase' on social media in support of the plans.
14. The increased recreational pressure predicted over coming years presents a significant threat to protected habitats and associated wildlife. Cannock Chase represents the largest surviving area of heathland habitat in the Midlands and is of international significance, yet the survival of some of its wildlife is in jeopardy. The County Council's landholding at Cannock Chase includes some of the most important areas and the protection of these habitats, whilst enabling more people to visit, requires some necessary change and compromise in order to meet legal requirements.

Conclusion and Recommendations

15. Following the resolution from the November 2020 Select Committee meeting, further consideration and discussion has been undertaken regarding the consultation undertaken by the SAC Partnership on its proposals for Cannock Chase. Taking into account the findings above, while mindful of the concerns raised by some members of the public and also the support from others, the process is considered sufficiently robust for the Council to proceed with the important and urgent work of protecting Cannock Chase SAC, working with the SAC Partnership.
16. It is recommended that the Committee notes the content of the report and offers any further comment which will be reported to Cabinet to inform its consideration of the proposals.

Next Steps

17. Following this committee, the proposals will be considered by Cabinet later in January. Any further recommendations from the Committee will be reported to Cabinet for its consideration.

Community Impact

A Community Impact Assessment of the proposals can be viewed [here](#).

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

[Mitigation Proposals for Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation - Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee - 12 November 2020](#)

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