

Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 20 January 2021

Protecting Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation for Future Generations



Cllr Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

“Not only is Cannock Chase a place of outstanding natural beauty, it is a home of national and international significance to rare plants and wildlife.

Staffordshire County Council has a legal and moral duty to protect that vulnerable flora and fauna while maintaining open access for increasing numbers of visitors.

This proposed investment of housebuilders’ money over 15 years is aimed at improving trails, way signs and interpretation boards, carrying out conservation education in schools and influencing where people park so that we reduce footfall where the landscape and wildlife are most vulnerable and increase capacity where it is more robust.

“This way we can protect the very things that people come to enjoy, the very things that make Cannock Chase so special and so loved by those who know it.”

Report Summary:

Plans have been developed for Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) to mitigate impacts of recreational pressure associated with a growing resident population. The plans include a range of on-site measures across the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to reduce pressure on the most sensitive habitats, improve infrastructure and facilities in more robust locations and raise public awareness of the sensitivity of the site.

The report outlines the implications of the plans on Staffordshire County Council’s (SCC) landholding at Cannock Chase Country Park. The proposals do link to SCC’s broad aims and will ultimately help achieve the essential balance between people’s enjoyment of the area and the protection of its special qualities. Flexibility and appropriate phasing will be required in their delivery to ensure that they are integrated with wider site management needs. Implementation of the plans will be funded by developer contributions made to the relevant district and borough councils over the next 15 years.

Recommendations

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Considers the proposed mitigation plans for Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC);

- b. Agree the recommended approach and proposed scheme of delegation as follows:
- i. Operational delivery to be overseen by the Assistant Director - Culture, Rural and Safer Communities;
 - ii. Agreement of options appraisal / feasibility study outcomes for Chase Road and Marquis Drive by delegated decision by the appropriate Cabinet Member in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities.

Local Members Interest
N/A

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Recommendations of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

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Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities

Reasons for Recommendations:

Background

1. The Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is designated under the Habitat Regulations 2017. This designation conveys the highest level of protection, reflecting its international significance. The area is also protected nationally as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and lies within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It supports species which are protected at a national and international level.
2. Cannock Chase is located close to several urban settlements, including Stafford, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Walsall. In 2018 there were approximately 406,384 residential properties within 15km radius of the AONB and potentially around 1 million people. The area is popular with residents and visitors – an estimated 2.5 million visits are made to Cannock Chase AONB every year. Most visitors are local however they mostly travel to the site by car and the majority are regular site users.
3. Given the vulnerable habitats and heritage features in many parts of the AONB, there have been growing concerns about recreational pressure and the need to actively manage recreation in the area.

4. Detailed studies provide evidence of the impacts of recreational pressure on the Cannock Chase SAC (see appendix 3), including:
 - a. Fragmentation of habitats from people creating new informal paths;
 - b. Disturbance to wildlife;
 - c. Trampling, leading to path widening, vegetation wear, erosion and soil compaction impacting on the heathland habitat;
 - d. Trampling of invertebrate nest sites;
 - e. Damage to tree roots where paths pass close to veteran trees;
 - f. Wildfire;
 - g. Eutrophication – damage to habitats caused by dog fouling;
 - h. Spread of disease (e.g. *Phytophthora*).
5. Within existing local plans, over 30,000 houses are planned to be built within 15km of the SAC. Based upon current patterns of use this is likely to result in an increase of around 15-20% in the number of visits to Cannock Chase, potentially rising to three million visits per year.
6. The Habitat Regulations require that any potential impacts on the SAC must be mitigated and a mechanism for this must be in place for local plans to be approved. Since several district and borough councils' local plans have the potential to impact on the Cannock Chase SAC, the SAC Partnership was created to develop a joint approach to mitigation.
7. The SAC Partnership developed a Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Measures plan which set out how this mitigation would be achieved. The plan is funded through developer contributions made for each house built within the agreed 'zone of influence' around the SAC. As part of this strategic approach, two detailed implementation plans have now been developed focusing on:
 - a. Site User Infrastructure, Education and Engagement
 - b. Car parking
8. The implementation plans together identify an estimated £7.8 million programme of potential work that could be undertaken. This goes beyond the current funding that will be available from the current local plans, but it is anticipated that the contributions will continue as further plans develop.
9. As owners of over 90% of the SAC, these plans have management implications for Staffordshire County Council and its operation of Cannock Chase Country Park. This paper summarises the proposals and their implications for the Country Park for consideration by the Committee.

SAC Mitigation Implementation Plans

10. The SAC mitigation implementation plans have been developed by consultants with expertise in managing recreational impacts on heathlands, and in collaboration with landowners and key stakeholders. They have been informed by a robust evidence base, visitor surveys and a public consultation which took place in October / November 2019. In this online consultation, over 6000 separate IP addresses

viewed the consultation web site, with over 400 responses received representing 130 individuals / organisations.

11. The plans include the following broad proposals:

Site User Infrastructure, Education and Engagement (Appendix 1)

(representing around 80% of estimated programme costs)

- a. Studies to examine feasibility of enhancing infrastructure at key visitor locations (Birches Valley and forestry land south of the A460; Museum of Cannock Chase and Marquis Drive);
- b. Path improvements and routes;
- c. Directing visitors through improved road and path signage and rationalising the path network;
- d. Face to face engagement;
- e. Digital communication;
- f. Interpretation;
- g. Education;
- h. Targeted information and activities for dog walkers, mountain bikers and other key audiences; and
- i. Monitoring.

Car Parking (Appendix 2) (Representing around 20% estimated programme costs)

- a. Reducing the number of parking locations in the most sensitive areas, to help reduce pressure there, and increasing parking capacity in more robust areas so that there will be no overall loss of parking capacity;
- b. Improvements to retained car parks;
- c. Provision of additional parking in sustainable locations;
- d. Opportunities to reduce car use;
- e. Measures to protect the site from displacement (parking on verges etc);
- f. Parking charges at some locations (with any surplus funds reinvested in the sites); and
- g. Monitoring.

12. The implementation plans include measures across much of the AONB, and over multiple ownerships, as measures to protect the SAC often involve diverting visitor pressure away from the more sensitive locations to more resilient areas. This has been informed by detailed sensitivity mapping which has assessed sensitivity of habitats, species and heritage features.

13. The plans identify an ideal approach to implementation to ensure that measures are in place to address issues such as displacement (e.g. parking on verges), and that the long-term car parks are improved ahead of any others being closed to minimise disruption and maintain adequate access for all users.

Implications of the proposals on SCC land

14. As previously stated, Staffordshire County Council owns a significant area of land and facilities within the AONB and owns over 90% of the Special Area of Conservation and therefore much of the most sensitive and highly protected habitat which is of key interest to the mitigation plans. Several actions are proposed on SCC land at Cannock Chase Country Park and these are set out below.
15. Direct proposals affecting SCC land and the suggested approaches / responses are:

In relation to Site User Infrastructure, Education and Engagement:

Proposal	Suggested SCC approach
<p>Special Project – Marquis Drive Master Plan – a plan to identify how undesignated land at Marquis Drive could be enhanced to upgrade and redesign visitor facilities including parking and recreational trails as well as visitor centre, toilets, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marquis Drive is an important visitor hub for the Chase however its current facilities are dated and unable to cope with visitor demand. There is a significant area of land that is not designated (although parts do have ecological and heritage interest) which could be used more effectively. • A master plan would identify how this area could be used to best effect and enable opportunities for funding to be better utilised to enhance facilities. • Funds are not currently available in the SAC programme for this study; however, it may be beneficial to consider bringing it forward in the programme as it may influence other decisions in this zone and enable other potential funding to be utilised.
<p>Promoted routes from key car parks and hubs targeted to different users</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer routes aimed at different users may help prevent people getting lost or using unsuitable routes that can create conflicts between users. • Funding for path improvements will be available however there will be ongoing maintenance costs. Identifying key routes would help prioritise maintenance efforts.
<p>Managing informal paths by reducing desire lines and unrequired routes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many unofficial paths on the Chase which cause fragmentation of the heathland. Reducing these allows habitat to recover and enables us to focus maintenance efforts on promoted / key routes.
<p>Raising awareness through face to face engagement, digital communication, targeted engagement with key user groups, interpretation and education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence suggests many people are unaware of the importance and fragility of the habitats on the country park, so these measures are important to empower site users to play an active role in its conservation. • It is however important that SAC messages are linked into wider messages about the site and delivered in an integrated way, including through

	<p>digital technology, to avoid duplication of effort and confusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted engagement and communication for key groups, e.g. mountain bikers, dog walkers, etc, is important and SCC rangers should be fully involved.
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In relation to Car Parking:

Proposal	Suggested SCC approach
<p>Rationalising car parking locations and options for Chase Road:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures to prevent parking along roadsides • Closure of some small lay-bys in sensitive areas • Options appraisal to explore future management of Chase Road bridleway and 22 parking areas along its route • Closure of some smaller car parks in sensitive areas • Retention and improvement of key car parks • Additional parking provision at sustainable locations • Reducing car use • Introducing car parking charges at key locations to support management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many parking areas around the country park which currently provide largely free parking in a wide range of locations. However, many of these take people into the most sensitive areas of the SAC and are contributing to negative impacts on habitats. There are also impacts on management resources, since they require regular litter collection, dealing with fly tipping and other anti-social behaviour. Rationalisation, particularly of small informal laybys, would therefore deliver ecological benefits and enable us to better manage resources. Around 50 sites are proposed for closure, however 33 of these are laybys with parking for four or fewer cars. The proposals retain in excess of 70 parking areas around the AONB in a range of locations, so there would still be a mix of busier and quieter areas accessible across the area. • Chase Road is a tarmacked bridleway across the site which currently provides permissive vehicular access and has 22 parking locations along it, including laybys. There are various options which require careful consideration, given the sensitive nature of this part of the site, the potential to create enhanced access for people with limited mobility, and the needs of bridleway users (pedestrians, horse riders and cyclists). It is suggested that the options for Chase Road should be discussed with user groups and should be subject to further public consultation. • Car park charges (pay & display) are proposed at 17 locations, although five of these will be further considered as part of the Chase Road options appraisal. The proposed locations would need to be considered in terms of whether charging is operationally feasible and before charges came into place the car parks would need to be improved and measures put in place to prevent displacement e.g. parking along verges etc. Around 50 free to park locations would remain around the AONB. • SCC currently operates pay & display at Marquis Drive and Milford Common on the Chase and at

	<p>Chasewater. It is recommended that as pay & display is extended to other SCC locations, charges are rationalised to be the same at all locations and mirroring the Chasewater rates (max £3 per day). Annual permits should be available (currently at £36) and these could be used at any SCC countryside site (costing less than 10p per day). A 6-month permit at £20 should also be considered to ensure affordability for users. Blue badge holders would continue to park for free.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The implementation of these measures would need to consider wider operational needs. Engagement with users would also be important to ensure that car park designs are fit for purpose, e.g. horse box provision and measures for horse riders discussed with the current users, inclusive access discussed with relevant groups, etc. • Improvements to car parks are proposed and this is much needed however it should be in keeping with landscape character. • We note that some changes to the proposals may be required. For example, we will be improving the Toc H trail, a disabled access trail on Brindley Heath which requires significant repair. The location of suitable parking for the trail is currently being considered but we may need to retain Campfield car park as a blue badge only parking area. Access to Brindley Village is also proposed to be retained, while formalising access to Oldacre Lane is not considered appropriate due to the unsuitability of this location.
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16. The proposals align well with SCC's aspirations for the site. We recognise the need to enhance the visitor offer through improved facilities, and to raise awareness and understanding of the significance of the site and meet our legal obligations to protect it. There are several factors that would need to be taken into account in implementing the plans on SCC land, including:

- a. The implementation of the plans must be integrated, and appropriately phased, into the wider work on the country park and cannot be considered in isolation. SCC has legal obligations to manage the ecological condition of the SAC and wider legal requirements for the site as a whole. Implementation of these plans will therefore need to be flexible to link in with wider operational and strategic needs.
- b. Work to raise awareness and engage the public must also be integrated with wider site management messages in a coordinated way and not in isolation; this must be carefully considered in implementation models going forward.
- c. There will be a need to ensure ongoing engagement with site users and key stakeholders as the plans are implemented to ensure people are aware of

changes and are able to input to design to ensure the infrastructure is fit for purpose.

Community Impact Assessment

17. A Community Impact Assessment has been undertaken for the proposals – see appendix 6 for details. The CIA indicates that there are many benefits to the community from the proposals and highlights the mitigation that will be required for potential negative impacts, which has been built into the suggested approach outlined above.

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Recommendations

18. The proposals were considered by the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee on 12th November 2020. As part of its consideration, the Committee heard a statement from the Save Cannock Chase group outlining its concerns about the proposals. The Committee supported the need to mitigate recreational impacts on the protected habitats in order to enable new housing development through Local Plans, including the need to reduce visitor spread and pressure on the most sensitive areas. 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, asked the Cabinet Member to look again at the consultation which has taken place (by the SAC) and consider whether it was sufficiently inclusive and whether additional work is required so that SCC can move forward with confidence.
- (b) The Cabinet Member report back to the Select Committee in the New Year.

19. The consultation process undertaken by the SAC Partnership in the development of these proposals is outlined in section 10 of this report. As requested by Select Committee, the process was reviewed, and the findings reported to Select Committee on 15th January 2021. Key findings were as follows:

- a. The plans are supported by a robust evidence base developed over many years;
- b. In 2018 a visitor survey asked over 1000 people for their views on potential mitigation measures, including charges and closures;
- c. In 2019 a public consultation was held on the proposals as outlined in section 10 of this report;
- d. The findings of these processes influenced the proposals, with suggestions of how concerns regarding less supported measures might be addressed where the conservation requirement meant they were considered essential components of the plans;
- e. Through Community Impact Assessment, the county council has considered how impacts on communities can be addressed through implementation on SCC land, resulting in proposals to keep charges at modest levels with annual permits to reduce costs for regular users, free parking for blue badge holders, protecting access for disabled people, retaining over 70 varied parking locations offering a range of types suited to different users..

- f. There will be further public consultation on proposals for Chase Road and Marquis Drive; and
 - g. There will be further engagement on the detail of proposals for each phase of implementation over the 15-year period and the plans will be reviewed every 5 years against progress and monitoring data.
 - h. Alongside letters of concern, there have also been a significant number of letters of support received for the proposals, plus public statements of support from Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, Cannock Chase AONB Partnership, North Staffordshire Green Party and West Midlands Bird Club.
20. Select Committee agreed that the proposals, with further consultation on Chase Road and Marquis Drive, plus further engagement on the detail of wider aspects as the programme is implemented, presented a logical way forward, given the need to actively conserve and protect the Chase. The committee asked that efforts be made to engage people through volunteering to actively support the conservation of the site. Also that consideration be given to the needs of people with sensory conditions as well as mobility issues. This has been considered through the Community Impact Assessment and will be built into the more detailed design at the implementation stages.

Conclusion and Recommendation

21. The plans set out a range of measures to mitigate potential impacts from increased recreational pressure from a growing resident population in the vicinity of the area. They are based on detailed evidence gathered over many years.
22. The plans offer the opportunity to balance the needs of people and environment, ensuring that more visitors can enjoy Cannock Chase without impacting on its special qualities. Mindful of the significant public interest and to ensure people can help shape solutions, it is recommended that the detail of each phase of work should include public engagement prior to detailed implementation. Given the long-term and phased nature of the programme, which will extend over the next 10-15 years, this will enable responses on project details to be considered and ensure awareness of works to be undertaken in a meaningful time frame.
23. It is therefore recommended that the plans are endorsed, and their implementation supported, in order to protect the SAC and reduce visitor pressure in the most sensitive areas. This should include further public engagement on the detail of implementation on the proposals at the appropriate time. Implementation should also be flexible, phasing delivery to integrate with other site management activities.

Scheme of Delegation

24. Subject to Cabinet approval of the proposals, it is proposed that final decisions to implement these proposals should be through delegated authority on the following basis:
- a. Operational delivery to be overseen by the Assistant Director - Culture, Rural and Safer Communities;

- b. Agreement of options appraisal / feasibility study outcomes for Chase Road and Marquis Drive by delegated decision by the appropriate Cabinet Member in consultation with the Deputy CXO & Director of Families and Communities.

Legal Implications

25. The proposals support delivery of requirements of the Habitat Regulations 2017. There are no legal implications to the proposals at this stage. The service is aware of the relevant legislation affecting the Park and appropriate checks against this will be built into project plans at implementation stage and appropriate consents applied for.

Resource and Value for Money Implications

26. The programme is to be funded through developer contributions collected by district and borough councils.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

[Appendix 1 – The Cannock Chase SAC Strategic Access Management & Monitoring Measures Detailed Implementation Plan: Site User Infrastructure, Education and Engagement](#)

[Appendix 2 - The Cannock Chase SAC Strategic Access Management & Monitoring Measures Detailed Implementation Plan: Car Parking](#)

[Appendix 3 – Evidence Base / Evidence Base Annex](#)

[Appendix 4 – Visitor Survey Part 1 / Part 2](#)

[Appendix 5 – Consultation Report](#)

Appendix 6 – Community Impact Assessment (a) and Summary Checklist (b)

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