

Joint Statement - Permanent closure of Kithurst Hill car park

Springhead Estate has confirmed that Kithurst Hill car park in the South Downs National Park will permanently close on 21 December 2022 when the current management agreement with West Sussex County Council expires.

Reasons for closure of car park

West Sussex County Council (WSSCC) has managed the car park since 1989 on land which is made available for free by the owner, Springhead Estate.

In October 2019, WSSCC gave one year's notice of its decision to terminate the agreement with Springhead Estate to manage the car park at Kithurst Hill. This decision was in line with WSSCC's approach to focus its resources on WSSCC-owned sites given that it is not the statutory responsibility of WSSCC to provide car parks.

Since the owner was keen to find a positive resolution, the South Downs National Park Trust (an independent charity) agreed in February 2020 to look at the feasibility of taking it on. To allow time for Springhead Estate and the SDNPT to negotiate a new management agreement, WSSCC put in place a series of temporary agreements with Springhead Estate, extending the existing management arrangement until 21 December 2022.

Unfortunately, following lengthy discussions, the South Downs National Park Trust reluctantly decided in March 2022 it was unable to take on the long-term financial liabilities of managing the car park without putting the delivery of its core charitable objectives at risk.

A spokesperson for Springhead Estate said: "We worked closely with both West Sussex County Council, and a potential new manager of the car park, over the last three years following the County Council's decision in 2019 to withdraw from managing the Kithurst Hill car park.

"Sadly, we cannot find a suitable body able to continue the management of the car park for the public's benefit under a new management agreement, and, as a result, the car park is to close. If in the future a suitable party is able to enter into a management agreement similar to the original agreement, Springhead Estate expects to continue to make available the land for the car park under the agreement free of charge."

A West Sussex County Council spokesperson said: "We do understand people's disappointment and were hopeful that a third-party could have taken over the management of this privately-owned car park.

"The County Council's agreement with the landowner to manage the car park expired in October 2020. We have to focus finite resources on County Council-owned land, so we did not plan to renew the agreement. However, a third party expressed an interest in taking on the management. To allow time for the landowner to negotiate a new agreement, we put a temporary agreement in place, running until December 2022.

"The County Council made every effort to extend the management agreement so negotiations could continue. Unfortunately, following discussions, the third-party decided not to pursue taking on the management of the car park, so now the

Council will be exiting the current temporary agreement when it ends on 21 December 2022.”

Statement from South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA)

The National Park covers 1600km² that includes many car parks run by public and private bodies. The SDNPA is not the Highways Authority or the Rights of Way Authority, nor does it own, run, or support any car parks within the National Park other than those on our own land (at Midhurst and Seven Sisters Country Park).

We understand this is a difficult and emotive issue, as many people value these smaller car parks for access to the top of the Downs for those who are less mobile. The private landowner of Kithurst car park has until now been supported by West Sussex County Council, but WSCC has taken the decision that it can no longer continue due to the acute financial pressures upon it and the need for it to protect vital frontline services.

When it was first apparent that WSCC might have to pull out, the SDNPA was approached, but we were very clear that we could not take on legal and financial responsibility for this car park. We also face financial pressures, having had our budget fixed in cash terms for the last three years and the next two. This has meant real terms cuts and we have had to make some staff redundant.

Since the owner was keen to find a positive resolution, the South Downs National Park Trust (an independent charity) agreed in February 2020 to look at the feasibility of taking it on. But in the new post-Covid financial environment, this is simply not a viable solution given the absence of any parking fees to offset the ongoing costs of maintenance, regular inspections to avoid problems with anti-social behaviour etc. The Trust reluctantly decided in March 2022 that it could not take on these long-term financial liabilities without putting the delivery of its core charitable objectives at risk.

We will continue to work with West Sussex County Council as one of our key partners, but unfortunately do not have the remit or the resources, given funding cuts, to run loss-making car parks.

11 November 2022