

Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019-2029



Foreword by Councillor Byron Rhodes Deputy Leader of the County Council

The environment around us is more important than ever. Now, more than at any other time, we are all taking more notice of the changes to our climate, the impact of our actions, and what the future may hold.

It's for this reason that I believe this strategy is a vital document. Country parks and open spaces are not legally required and - yes - they cost money to run, when money is tight. But they are so fundamentally important.

Firstly, I believe we must safeguard our green spaces as part of our carbon agenda. Trees and plants are natural warriors against the climate emergency which has been recognised globally.

Secondly, our parks are welcome habitats for plants, insects and animals. We must protect and enhance this diversity.

And finally, for residents to enjoy – for sport, for mental wellbeing and as part of their community.

I urge you to read on.

Byron Rhodes

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1. Executive Summary

Leicestershire County Council has a wide network of country parks and open spaces.

Although the provision of country parks is not a statutory service or a council priority it is recognised that they are a key asset that we can use to support the delivery of the many of the council's strategic objectives.

This strategy sets out our approach to developing our country parks and provides a framework for working across departments and engaging with partners, citizens and communities to ensure we continue to provide great parks for the residents and visitors of Leicestershire.

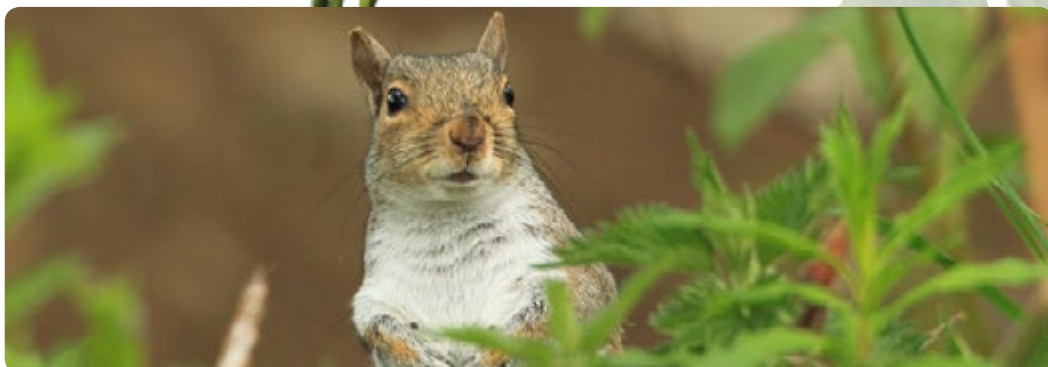
The strategy sets out our ambition about what we want to achieve whilst recognising the financial challenges the council faces as one of the lowest funded councils in England.

It outlines how we will adopt an innovative approach to increasing our income and working with our national partnership organisations; communities and local businesses to explore funding, sponsorship and grant opportunities where ever possible to support the development of our parks and open spaces. This is supported by our ambitions to adopt a more robust approach to increasing participation and volunteering across all our park activities.

In summary our country parks and open spaces are an asset that we are committed to continuing to develop; protect and preserve for existing and future generations to enjoy. We hope that you will participate and support us to deliver the strategy and achieve our ambitions.



There is huge scope and potential and as the 21st Century evolves, there is a growing body of evidence which demonstrates that parks and open spaces can have a positive impact that goes beyond traditional ecological and environmental outcomes



It is an exciting opportunity. There is huge scope and potential and as the 21st Century evolves, there is a growing body of evidence which demonstrates that parks and open spaces can have a positive impact that goes beyond traditional ecological and environmental outcomes and that they can make a broader contribution towards promoting economic and health benefits as well as improving quality of life. Moreover, through their use, they can further social cohesion and engagement, inspire community spirit and even provide opportunities for individuals to overcome loneliness and regain purpose within their lives.

This strategy aims to provide a framework for action that will transform our parks and position them to be at the centre of delivering positive environmental, ecological, health and social outcomes for citizens and communities as well as visitors to Leicestershire. Through our parks and open spaces strategy the county council has an opportunity to develop facilities that will enable greater social interaction and more active recreation as well as providing peaceful space for quiet reflection. The wide range of direct and indirect benefits could be far reaching.



Over the next decade, our plans will progress incrementally and adapt to the challenges presented by an ever-changing world and to accommodate the changing expectations of citizens. Our ambition is great but needs to be focused within the resources we have available. Nonetheless, we believe that through volunteering, community engagement and partnership working, we can create welcoming, safe, inclusive and accessible parks for the citizens and communities of Leicestershire and visitors.



2. Strategic Context - Leicestershire our county

Set in the heart of England, Leicestershire is a mainly rural county with picturesque villages, rolling farmland and wonderful examples of historic and natural environment.



With a population of over 650,000, the area is generally affluent, unemployment is below the national average and Leicestershire ranks amongst the top places to bring up a family as the cost of living is comparatively low and house prices are below the national average.

Leicestershire also has the largest economy in the East Midlands and is home to major international businesses including: Next, Caterpillar, Santander, and DHL. With strong creative industries, food manufacturing and health sectors, Leicestershire is a great place to do business.

Further growth is anticipated and the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) has strategic economic plans which aim to create 45,000 jobs, support the expansion of 15,000 businesses and the creation of over 1,000

startups. Furthermore, around 187,000 homes are set to be built in the city and county over the next 30 years as the population of Leicestershire is projected to increase by 15.8% to 787,500 by 2041, an increase of 107,100 people from 2016.

Balanced with these developing opportunities there are emerging social challenges. It has been estimated that by 2030 the number of people aged 85 and over will increase from 17,700 (2015 estimate) to 33,100 - an increase of 87%, and the number of people with complex disabilities will increase by 30%. It is also projected that 56,000 men and 58,000 women are living in the 'age gap' between healthy life expectancy and life expectancy potentially in poor health. This accounts for 17% of the population in the county. Around two-thirds of deaths among the under 75s are caused by diseases and illness that are largely avoidable, and there are increasing numbers of health-related issues due to sedentary lifestyles and obesity.

Climate change is also an ongoing and evolving threat and we are all experiencing extreme fluctuations of weather such as heatwaves and downpours. Our parks and open spaces are already being affected by these changes but also play a crucial role in reducing the negative effects of climate change. As climate change intensifies so our parks and open spaces will have a more significant role to play and so too will the trees within our parks.



3. Purpose of the strategy

Set within this context, the underlying principle of our strategy will be to use our parks and open spaces to provide multiple benefits that will support the citizens and communities of today and tomorrow.

Our approach will be influenced by consultation and engagement and the detail of specific park plans will support the delivery of integrated health, socio-economic and environmental priorities.

There is now an opportunity to use our green space to tackle a wide range of ecological and environmental benefits and beyond. Undeniably, many of the solutions for preserving and protecting the natural environment are also potential enablers to support health and wellbeing and develop local communities and the local economy.



In a nutshell, the aim of our strategy is to explore a sustainable way to manage and fund our parks and open spaces across Leicestershire so that they can be utilised to support broader strategic priorities and align with the needs of our citizens and communities as well as national, regional and local policy priorities.

The strategy sets out our long-term approach up until 2029. The specific detail will later be developed in more comprehensive plans for our primary and secondary sites, which will then be reviewed annually in tandem with light touch consultation and ongoing engagement.



4. An integrated approach

Underpinning this strategy is a desire to utilise the asset of our parks and open spaces to work seamlessly across departments and more joined up with partners and communities to deliver integrated strategic objectives. In achieving this, we also want to capture the voice of the citizen and communities and also to enable user greater participation in shaping the plans of individual parks.

In our parks
we will...



5. Our vision

The Council's Vision:

To have great parks that improve the quality of life for Leicestershire's communities and visitors



6. Core principles

Underpinning our vision are a set of core principles:

- Country parks and open spaces are not a statutory service, but they are a county council asset that can contribute to the wider objectives of the council including health, education, biodiversity and the environment
- Parks and open spaces will be safe and accessible for citizens and visitors and central to everyday community life
- The strategy will develop a vision that will be shaped with elected members, officers across all key services, partners and communities
- Volunteering, community engagement and partnership participation are integral to delivery of the strategy
- Our parks will become sustainable through the income that we generate through them and funding that we access

7. Priority themes

1. Provide a network of safe and accessible parks

We will ensure that high quality, safe and accessible parks and open spaces are provided, maintained and improved to support our existing and future communities, with greater connectivity linked by pedestrian and cycle routes and improved green corridors.

Goals:

- Enhance the visitor facilities within our parks and develop a plan for proactive maintenance
- Ensure good access to our park areas and improved paths to enable all residents to enjoy our parks
- Maximise opportunities for physical activity and supporting mental health well being
- Each of our primary parks will have a five-year action plan

Actions - how we will do this:

- Developing our café, picnic, seating and toilet facilities
- Developing more cost-effective, multipurpose pathways and providing accessible trails for all levels of ability
- Improving signage and site interpretation and developing route maps
- Developing our outdoor recreational activities and play equipment for children in specific parks



2. Ensure that the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of all sites are conserved and developed

We will work with partners to ensure that we preserve the distinctive character of our landscapes, enhance and enhance existing areas of biodiversity and contribute to climate change by aligning with the key objectives of the Leicestershire Environment Strategy.

Goals:

- Increase the biodiversity within our parks with a greater appreciation for developing appropriate habitats for plants, birds and other wildlife
- Identify and manage pressure points of high usage to ensure our heritage sites continue to be preserved
- Increase the sustainability of our parks by encouraging environmental practices
- Manage our heritage assets so that there is a greater appreciation of the value of heritage and conservation

Actions - how we will do this:

- Creating and enhancing pollinator habitats and species-rich environments
- Improving the local ecological networks through the preservation and development of wildlife corridors
- Raising public awareness of the importance of our biodiversity and how they can help to support its conservation
- Offering a programme of environmental activities and guided wildlife experiences



3. Ensure widespread engagement and participation of citizens, communities and partners

We want to create and deliver public value through volunteering, community engagement, consultation and partnership working. Therefore, we will work to improve the number of visitors and aspire to appeal and cater for diverse audiences. We will engage with communities and partners to attract and work with under-represented and hard to reach groups.

Goals:

- Develop our relationships with local communities and community groups to encourage greater participation and visitor diversity
- Increase the range of volunteer opportunities to build skills, create social cohesion and instil a sense of pride and ownership
- Develop strong links with Leicestershire schools and academies to work together to support learning
- Encourage participation in environmental activities of all abilities

Actions - how we will do this:

- Appoint a volunteer co-ordinator to increase volunteers
- Conduct consultation with interested groups and organisations
- Develop more educational activities with schools and park rangers
- Work more closely with communities and parish councils to identify needs and aspirations
- Develop activities to support health and wellbeing, such as park runs



4. Develop a sustainable financial model for growth

The council continues to face financial challenges and we remain as one of the lowest funded county councils in England. We will therefore adopt a more commercial approach to increasing income, review outdoor charges and licence fees. Our Leicestershire country parks will remain in council ownership, but we will explore funding through: income generation, funding, sponsorship and donations.

Goals:

- Identify new ways of funding
- Increase our commercial activities
- Obtain sponsorship for events and activities by working in partnership with local businesses
- Secure funding through Section 106 planning obligations
- Encourage donations and legacies

Actions - how we will do this:

- Developing our marketing and advertising
- Monitoring and keeping under review our café and catering offers
- Developing a programme of events to increase number of visitors and revenue
- Seeking opportunities for applying for local and national funding and grants
- Maximising social value opportunities from our key suppliers



8. Our parks

Destination parks

Our major parks will be developed as a network of destinations, catering for the local community that they serve but also attracting residents and visitors from further afield.

- 1 Snibston Country Park
- 2 Beacon Hill Country Park
- 3 Broombriggs Farm & Windmill Hill
- 4 Watermead Country Park
- 5 Market Bosworth Country Park
- 6 Bosworth Battlefield Country Park

Secondary parks and open spaces

Our secondary parks and open spaces, whilst not having the same scope as our destination parks, are still a significant part of our green infrastructure. They will still be managed in accordance with the primary themes of the strategy but perhaps with them there will be even greater opportunity to involve and engage the local community and partners and they are therefore classified more as local parks than destination parks.

- 7 Donington Le Heath Country Park
- 8 Jubilee Wood
- 9 Sheet Hedges Wood
- 10 Burrough Hill Country Park
- 11 Sarah's Wood
- 12 Donisthorpe Woodlands
- 13 Saltersford Valley Picnic Areas
- 14 Bagworth Heath
- 15 New Lount Nature Reserve
- 16 Oakthorpe Picnic Area
- 17 Ashby Woulds Heritage Trail
- 18 Brampton Valley Way

Locations of our country parks



Snibston

Snibston Country Park comprises of an area of woodland and grassland on the old Snibston colliery site and includes the woodland and lakes of the Grange nature reserve. The country park lies immediately to the south of the Snibston industrial heritage area where the mining headstock is classified as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). Both the park and heritage area are included in the current Snibston development plans.

Objectives

- Redevelopment of the site with a new cycleway, mountain bike trails and café
- Provide a safe and accessible park
- Develop the site to balance the needs of a changing community
- Develop and improve existing facilities for walking, jogging and family cycling on the site
- Develop the site as a hub for the community



Beacon Hill

Beacon Hill takes its name from its history as a signaling point. Up until the early part of the 20th Century, Beacon Hill was part of the Beaumanor estate, owned by the Perry-Herrick family. In 1947, the site was purchased by Leicestershire County Council to protect its value as a public open space. In the early 1970s Beacon Hill was designated as a country park and has now become one of the premier visitor attractions in Leicestershire at the gateway of the National Forest. The heathland of Beacon Hill is an important site for wildlife, providing varied habitats for a wide range of plants and animals. Due to its ecological and geological importance, much of the country park is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and areas around the summit are protected as a scheduled ancient monument (SAM).

Objectives

- Develop the park as a family destination
- Install more children's equipment
- Develop the café as a focal point of community engagement
- Develop the Labyrinth as a children's attraction
- Continue to manage the woodland and heathland SSSIs



Broombriggs Farm

Broombriggs Farm was donated to Leicestershire County Council in 1970 by the Frear family. Their desire was to preserve its natural beauty as a typical Charnwood Forest farm so that it could be enjoyed by all visitors.

Today, the farm is still managed in traditional ways which help to retain its varied landscapes and fine views across the surrounding countryside. Arable crops are mainly grown in some of the lower lying fields on the farm. These have relatively good, fertile, easily worked soils. The fields are either sown with cereals such as barley, wheat or oats or with other arable crops such as turnips. The upper fields on the farm are used mainly to graze livestock. The farmland is interspersed with small woodlands and parkland trees creating an attractive landscape.

Objectives

- Continue to improve visitor access around the farm
- Develop farming practices to demonstrate conservation farming
- Expand the orchard and develop agro-forestry schemes
- Expand capacity for visitor car parking
- Utilise Broombriggs Cottage



Watermead

Watermead Country Park covers an area of 100 hectares and comprises wetlands, grassland, meadows and marshland. Lying on the north edge of Leicester city, it is bounded by the large villages of Thurmaston, Birstall and Syston. It is in the valley of the River Soar and Grand Union Canal, an area which has been worked extensively for sand and gravel. It is a very significant “green lung”, with several ecologically significant areas including one of the largest Reedbeds in the county. Watermead provides visitor opportunities for walking, cycling, jogging, picnicking and bird watching. The park is managed in association with colleagues at the city council who look after the southern area of the country park.

Objectives

- Develop café/catering facilities
- Repair/replace the existing toilet block
- Introduce new children’s play facilities
- Rationalise car parking arrangements on satellite car parks (e.g. Mill Lane)
- Improve nature reserve habitats and develop opportunities for wildlife watching
- Enhance and protect biodiversity



Market Bosworth

Market Bosworth Country Park contains a mix of open grassland, parkland and woodland. The park has facilities for picnics and barbeques, and a play area. The park contains a network of surfaced paths providing good access for all and an opportunity for walking and jogging. The park contains woodlands and other habitats that are ideal for bird watching and general nature study, and a visit to the wild flower areas in the spring can be rewarded with bluebells, fritillaries, ox-eye daisies, cowslips and primroses. The arboretum at the park contains a wide-ranging collection of exotic tree species including Coast and Dawn Redwoods, Himalayan Birches, Japanese Maples, Evergreen Oaks, Hemlocks and Eucalyptus.

Objectives

- Continue to improve and develop the arboretum
- Integrate the former pasture land into the park's parkland landscape
- Expand and improve visitor access
- Expand and improve children's play facilities
- Develop and improve the Bow Pool lake and associated Stew ponds



Bosworth Battlefield

The country park includes a network of surfaced trails which radiate from the famous Bosworth Battlefield Visitor Centre around a wonderful farmed landscape, connecting with the Ashby Canal and the Battlefield Railway at Shenton station. The site of the Battle of Bosworth is of national significance and international interest. It is infamous as the place where King Richard III lost his life and crown to Henry Tudor, and the beginning of the powerful Tudor dynasty.

Objectives

- Improve interpretation on the country park to reflect the landscape and wildlife of the area
- Improve the system of car park charging/replace obsolete pay and display machines



9. Communicating the strategy

Once the strategy has been approved by Cabinet, it will be available on our website. Following the publication of the strategy, officers will work to complete plans for individual sites which shall also be available.

10. Funding our strategy

Our aspirations are set against a backdrop of financial challenge and to deliver the strategy we will need to work in new and innovative ways. As we deliver the detail of our plans, we will seek to develop a financial model that will not only pursue grants and funding but will also welcome legacies and donations as well as sponsorship, advertising and gifts of social value aligned with the corporate responsibility strategies of local businesses.

11. Monitoring and review

The broad outline strategy is intended to shape the future planning, design, management and maintenance of our country parks and open spaces. Once the strategy has been agreed by cabinet a more detailed plan will be developed and individual management plans for each of our main destination parks. The plans will be monitored, reviewed and updated on an annual basis.

12. Summary

In summary, our country parks and open spaces are an asset that we want existing and future generations to enjoy. They are not a statutory service or a council priority, but they are a key asset that can be used to support and enable many of the council's strategic objectives. The strategy is intended to set out a direction of travel and provide a framework within which we can work across departments and with partners, citizen and communities to provide great parks for the citizens and visitors of Leicestershire.

The strategy is set out to express ambition, but it must be set within the context that the council continues to face financial challenges and remains as one of the lowest funded county councils in England. We will therefore need to adopt a more innovative approach to increasing income and working in partnership with partners and communities to explore funding, sponsorships and donations as well as developing a more robust approach to volunteering. This strategy sets out a framework for how we are going to make it happen and we hope that you will participate in delivering and supporting it.

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