



CABINET - 22 MAY 2020

COUNTRY PARKS AND OPEN SPACES STRATEGY 2019-2029

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

PART A

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Cabinet on the outcome of the consultation on the draft Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019 - 2029 and to seek approval for the final Strategy (appended to this report).

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that:
 - a) The comments of the Scrutiny Commission on the draft Strategy, and changes made as a result, be noted;
 - b) The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019 – 2029 be approved.

Reasons for Recommendation

3. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy has been developed to give a strategic direction to developments, including maintenance and preservation, within country parks in Leicestershire over the next ten years.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

4. The draft Strategy was considered by the Scrutiny Commission on 27 January 2020 and its comments are included in Part B of this report.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

5. The Cabinet at its meeting in October 2019 authorised the Director to progress work on an Action Plan covering the six main destination Country Parks and for this and the draft Strategy to be referred to the Scrutiny Commission for consideration.
6. The Council's Strategic Plan 2018-2022 sets out five strategic outcomes deemed to be essential for a good quality of life for Leicestershire residents. It establishes a clear vision for the place and its people and aspires to have a

more joined-up approach to service delivery. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy will contribute towards two of those outcomes: Wellbeing and Opportunity (ensuring that people have the opportunities and support to take control of their health and wellbeing) and Great Communities (thriving and integrated places where people help and support each other and take pride in their local area).

7. The Leicestershire Communities Strategy 2017-2021 sets out how, by working with partners and local communities the Council can make real improvements, including to people's health, social networks, and the environment. The proposed approach to the management of its country parks accords with and supports this.
8. The new Strategy will help support the Council's Environment Strategy 2018-2030: Delivering a Better Future, which is currently being refreshed, by delivering on several of the Environment Strategy's key aims, including "Carbon and Climate Change Impacts" and "Biodiversity, Habitats and Environment". This will be principally through delivering on Priority Theme 2 in the Country Parks Strategy: "Ensure that the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of all sites are conserved and developed".
9. The Council's draft Tree Management Strategy 2019-2024 notes that Country Parks have the greatest percentage of local authority owned trees in the county. The strategic aims of the Tree Management Strategy will be contributed to through Priority Theme 1 "Provide a network of safe and accessible parks" and Priority Theme 2 "Ensure that the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of all sites are conserved and developed" in the Country Parks Strategy.
10. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is aligned with the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2020/21 - 2023/24, approved by the County Council on 19 February 2020.
11. Set within this context, the underlying principle of the "Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy" will be to use parks and open spaces to provide multiple benefits that will support the citizens and communities of both today and tomorrow and support the Council in delivering its wider strategic objectives.

Resource Implications

12. In 2018/19 the total expenditure on country parks was £770,000, the total income was £440,000 resulting in an overall net cost of £330,000.
13. As a result of this Strategy, the overall net cost of country parks is forecast to fall to £150,000 by 2023/24.
14. The Director of Law and Governance has been consulted.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

15. A copy of this report will be circulated to all members of the Council.

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PART B

Background

16. The population of Leicestershire is projected to grow by 16% by 2041 and there are ambitious plans to develop new houses and develop the local economy over the coming years. The Council needs also to think how it can continue to maintain and sustain green spaces that will support modern lifestyles by having safe, interesting and accessible country parks.
17. Although parks and open spaces are enjoyed by many, they are not a statutory service. However, the Strategy recognises that they are an important asset, and one that can be positioned to support the Council's strategic outcomes as well as meeting the needs and expectations of communities. Whilst there is a clear commitment to deliver improvements there are also challenges. The infrastructure needs to be maintained and improved with the limited funding that is available, and the financial pressures on the Authority mean that expectations around investment need to be managed and more innovative ways, including seeking more grant funding, to maintain and expand the country parks services need to be identified.
18. The Council's vision for its parks and open spaces remains:

"To have great parks that improve the quality of life for Leicestershire's communities and visitors".
19. As explained in previous reports to the Cabinet and the Scrutiny Commission, the Strategy establishes a framework within which the Council can improve the parks over the long-term against the backdrop of limited and uncertain funding. It seeks to build on existing community support in developing volunteering opportunities and partnership working, including with other organisations such as the National Forest Company and the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, encourage commercial organisations to exercise their corporate social responsibility through sponsorship and investment, work in partnership with elected members and Parish Councils, and use income generated at the Parks to help preserve and maintain them for the future.
20. The Strategy distinguishes between the main sites and lesser parks and open spaces. The main 'destination' parks are those which are generally the reason for people's visit and not only cater for the local community but attract visitors from further afield:
 - Snibston Colliery Park – 28.95 ha (hectares)
 - Beacon Hill Country Park – 123.83 ha
 - Broombriggs Farm and Windmill Hill Country Park – 70.34 ha
 - Watermead Country Park – 99.97 ha
 - Market Bosworth Country Park – 35.43 ha
 - Bosworth Battlefield Country Park – 13.37 ha.

21. Although the Strategy distinguishes between these main sites and lesser parks and open spaces, the Council remains committed to working with local communities to develop and manage these lesser parks, whilst acknowledging that they cannot be made financially sustainable in the way that is possible for the destination parks.
22. Within the next 12 months more detailed management plans for the six destination parks will be developed and other plans for some of the other parks and open spaces will be commenced. These will contain detail on estates management, to ensure a good quality standard, keeping parks and open spaces clean, green, accessible and safe.
23. The Council will continue its commitment to provide a park ranger service to all the main country parks to ensure the wellbeing of the site and of its visitors. Access to sites is generally good and surfaced routes will continue to be extended to improve access and connectivity.
24. The long-term effects of COVID-19 on the strategy are mixed. The closures of Country Parks on 22 March 2020 and Government restrictions on movement have meant considerable delays to a number of maintenance and development programmes and will result in a delay to the overall delivery of the Strategy of at least six months. Even as lockdown is released, it will take time for Country Parks to return to their previous level of activity and managing demand alongside social distancing requirements will prove challenging. A phased approach is likely to be adopted with some visitor facilities remaining closed for a much longer period. More positively, the effects of lockdown have meant that the importance of open spaces is being increasingly recognised and suggests there will be an increased demand for parks once lockdown is lifted.
25. Financially, the effects of COVID-19 have meant that the income that Country Parks receive from car parking, cafes, events and concessions has ceased or reduced. The vast majority of funding organisations that would have been approached for support with projects have also diverted their attention to immediate relief for organisations affected by COVID-19 and are not accepting applications to their normal grant programmes at present although it is expected that this will be resumed in the future. As most of the expenditure for Country Parks relates to environmental management, the demands of which continue despite the lockdown, the financial year 2020-2021 is likely to prove challenging.

Comments of the Scrutiny Commission and Officer Response

26. The Scrutiny Commission considered a report at its meeting on 27 January 2020.
27. Members welcomed the Strategy, in particular the assurance that all Country Parks and open spaces were valuable assets that would be looked after and raised the following points:

- a. It was felt that the level of housing and economic growth proposed for Leicestershire emphasised the importance of parks and open spaces, which could form a key part of local communities and were available for everyone to enjoy. It was also noted that there was enthusiasm in some parts of the county for Friends groups to work with Country Parks.
 - b. People should not be excluded from visiting the parks through increased car parking charges but that there was also a need to consider green initiatives such as sustainable travel schemes. It was suggested that the County Council work with community groups and litter-producing businesses in this area and officers undertook to follow these suggestions up. Members were reminded that the Country Parks also needed to have reasonable parking available and that charges covered maintenance of the car parks.
 - c. Some disappointment was expressed that there were very few Country Parks in the south and east of the County. However, members were reminded that some parks had been gifted to the Council, or had been acquired as the opportunity arose, for example from reclaimed former coalfields and a number of parks and green spaces across the county were owned by district councils. As part of new developments such as Lutterworth East, consideration would be given to establishing new Country Parks or open spaces and the Strategy has been amended to include this aspiration. At the members' suggestion, a comprehensive list of publicly-owned parks and open spaces in Leicestershire has now been added to the Strategy, including the County Council-owned site of special scientific interest at Misterton Marshes.
 - d. One of the priorities for the Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy should be carbon neutrality or offsetting the County Council's carbon footprint, for example through tree planting. The importance of Country Parks in helping the Council to achieve net-zero carbon is now reflected more strongly in the Strategic Outcomes of the Strategy.
 - e. The Commission was pleased to note that the County Council was making the most of opportunities to work with local businesses that were focused on social responsibility. The need to balance commercial activity with providing a service for local communities was recognised, as was the aim for the Country Parks to be cost neutral.
28. An outline action plan was presented to Scrutiny Commission covering all of the six main parks in some detail and the secondary parks at a high level. More detailed management plans will be developed, initially for each of the destination parks and for all parks in time. These will be created in consultation with officers from all internal departments and local members.
29. As individual plans are developed for each of the destination parks they will be shared with local Parish Councils and the local member(s), and views of local communities will be sought through annual online surveys.

30. There will be specific consultation with officers from the Council's Public Health Department about organising sponsored walks, cross country and park runs, as well as other outdoor events involving schools, clubs and local communities.
31. Feedback from the Cabinet at its meeting in October 2019 and from the Scrutiny Commission has been incorporated into the final Strategy.

Conclusion

32. Country parks and open spaces are part of what makes Leicestershire a great place to live. These are exciting times and we want parks and open spaces to be a key part of Leicestershire's future. The Strategy will provide a framework and deliver the impetus for their maintenance and improvement.
33. Green assets can contribute to positive health, social, environmental and economic improvements. The Council wants its parks and open spaces to deliver as many positive outcomes for citizens and communities as possible and to do this needs to adopt a strategic approach to their management.

Equality and Human Rights Implications

34. There are no equality or human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report. The Strategy commits the Council to developing relationships with local communities and community groups to encourage greater participation and visitor diversity. The report acknowledges that any future change to the Council's policies, procedures, functions and services because of the strategy or the more detailed plans will be the subject of an Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment.

Environmental Implications

35. The Strategy delivers positively for the environment of Leicestershire, committing the Council to strengthening biodiversity and habitats, mitigating the effects of climate change through effective tree management and encouraging better appreciation of wildlife by visitors to Country Parks.

Background Papers

Leicestershire Communities Strategy 2017-2021

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2019/3/8/Communities-Strategy-2017-21.pdf>

Leicestershire County Council Strategic Plan 2018-2022

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/about-the-council/council-plans/the-strategic-plan>

Report to the Council on 19 February 2020: MTFS 2020/21 – 2023/24

<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=6038&Ver=4>

Appendix

Leicestershire Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019-2029