



**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 7 JUNE 2023**

**BIODIVERSITY ENHANCEMENTS IN LEICESTERSHIRE
COUNTRY PARKS**

**REPORT OF THE
DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES**

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update on the Committee on the ongoing work within our Country Parks service to improve the biodiversity of our country parks and open spaces.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy was agreed by Cabinet in May 2020 and runs from 2019 to 2029.
3. The Tree Management Strategy was approved by Cabinet in March 2020.

Background

4. Leicestershire County Council has a wide network of 18 parks and open spaces covering over 530ha. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy agreed in 2020, set out six destination parks: Beacon Hill Country Park, Broombriggs Farm, Watermead Country Park, Snibston Colliery Park, Bosworth Battlefield and Market Bosworth Country Park, alongside the Council's secondary parks elsewhere in the county. 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.
5. Three of the Council's parks form part of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) (Beacon Hill Country Park, Sheet Hedges Wood and Jubilee Wood). SSSIs are sites that have been designated due to containing unique species or habitats of high scientific value for conservation. Five parks contain Local Nature Reserves (Reed Bed Nature Reserve at Watermead Country Park, Moira Junction, Grange Nature Reserve at Snibston Colliery Park, New Lount Nature Reserve,

Saltersford Valley. LNRs are sites chosen by the local authority as particularly significant for their wildlife, geology, education, or enjoyment (without disturbing wildlife).

Priority habitats and some highlights

6. Woodland Habitats – a Countryside Stewardship Woodland Improvement agreement is in place with Defra from 1 January 2022 – 31 December 2026 for woodlands within most of the Council's parks. This builds upon the principles set out within the Council's Tree Strategy and promotes excellence in silviculture (the care and cultivation of woodlands), whilst increasing biodiversity and making woodlands more resilient to pests and diseases.
7. Since the commencement of the funding we have undertaken:
 - 5800m² of coppicing, 35,350m² of thinning to max 40% thin;
 - The installation of 52 small bird boxes, 4 large raptor boxes and 8 bee boxes;
 - Pest control across sites to protect young trees.
8. Grassland Habitats – we continue to manage a number of successful wildflower meadows at Beacon Hill, Oakthorpe Colliery, Market Bosworth Country Park and Watermead Country Park. Thanks to funding from the Trent Rivers Trust Botanica WWFUK Pollinators Project Grant we have been able to restore a number of grassland areas at Watermead, as well as create some new areas of grassland. The rangers and volunteer groups have scarified the ground of existing meadows, before rolling and sowing new seed. In the late summer they cut and rake the arisings from the meadows.
9. Heathland Habitats - the heathland restoration work at Beacon Hill continues with a pilot closure of a small area of the park at Jewels to encourage ground nesting birds and other wildlife associated with a heathland habitat undertaken in 2021. It was decided that the timings for the closure should be in line with the nesting bird season, April until end of August, as nesting birds would be one of our indicator species. Grazing would also be restricted and reduced in the area over this period, to reduce disturbance and over grazing. However, conservation grazing would be required in order to maintain and enhance the sward. Ecologists have been assessing the impact of this pilot and have identified several examples of birds using the area that would have been unlikely to have nested were there access by humans and dogs during the breeding season. The positive results of this trial have meant that we have continued with the temporary closure of this area in each year since.

10. At Bagworth Heath Country Park we have undertaken heathland improvement works to remove scrub and small trees and open up the heathland.
11. Wetland Habitat - Watermead has extensive areas of Norfolk Reed, mainly situated within the boundaries of the Reedbed Nature Reserve, though with expanding patches forming around the park. The Reedbed Nature Reserve is now nearly 9 acres in size and is managed on a 3-year rotation system. Aquaclear, a reed cutting company manages the beds over a week period during February under the supervision of the Senior Ranger.
12. Since 2019 we have been creating a new reedbed to the west of the Ken Goodrich Sand Martin hide in the Reedbed nature reserve. The area of reedbed is now the largest in Leicestershire. This supports several rare or threatened bird species which occur within this part of the Soar Valley and helps with the sustainable water environment contained within the Soar Catchment Management Plan with water quality, flood capacity, provision of a fish refuge and the removal of silt from the floodplain.
13. Freshwater habitat - at Snibston Colliery Park and Donington le Heath Country Park we have undertaken pond restoration works, as part of a Council biodiversity net gain scheme. At Watermead Country Park, we have added a number of scrapes around the site to provide habitat for wading birds.
14. All of this work is only possible because of the dedication of our small team of Country Parks rangers, supported by over 100 volunteers. These volunteers support us with a variety of tasks from acting as wardens on our sites, to litter picking, to carrying out significant pieces of environmental conservation activities as part of larger teams. A number of the activities listed above would not be possible without the volunteers.

Recommendation

15. Members are asked to note the report and for any comments on the report or the Country Parks Service.

Background papers

Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy:

<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s152649/APPENDIX%20Country%20Parks%20and%20Open%20Spaces%20Strategy%202019-2029.pdf>

Tree Management Strategy:

<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s152064/Tree%20Management%20Strategy.pdf>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None

Equality and Human Rights Implications

There are no equality or human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

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