



**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 9 SEPTEMBER 2024**

ANNUAL REVIEW OF LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTRY PARKS

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the ongoing work within the County Council's Country Parks service.

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 and runs from 2020 to 2025.
4. At its meeting in June 2023, the Committee received a report outlining biodiversity enhancements within the Country Parks service.

Background

5. Leicestershire County Council has a wide network of 18 parks and open spaces covering over 530ha. The Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, 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.
6. 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 (LNRs) (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).

Review of 2023/24

7. Visitor numbers to the major destination parks continued to be substantially above pre-pandemic levels.

Car numbers	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Beacon Hill	93757	131845	133730	154770	153631	106042
Market Bosworth	27678	47402	48093	45915	42916	26277
Watermead	5117	29761	29417	30199	26925	19392

These three sites have been included as they have modern parking systems in place which allow the capture of this data, other sites do not have the same level of data available. These numbers are car numbers, rather than visitor numbers. Many of the sites have multiple pedestrian entrances and so ascertaining exact visitor numbers is impossible. These numbers also do not include the large number of sites that do not have car parks or have free car parks. Numbers for 2024 are 'year to date' figures (July).

8. Flooding was a real challenge this year at Watermead Country Park, with over 11 flood events throughout the year. Unprecedentedly, vehicle access to the entire park was closed on a number of occasions. The aftermath of the floods led to extensive damage and mess, with mud and detritus across paths and some tarmac paths which were lifted and floated away by the force of the flood.
9. 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. Over the past year, coppicing and thinning across a number of sites has been undertaken, as well as the installation of bird, bee and raptor boxes and pest control to protect young trees.
10. Tree planting continued on all sites. Two new trees were planted in country parks to mark the King's Coronation. An acer 'Princeton Gold', a favourite tree of King Charles III, has been planted on the long driveway overlooking Bosworth Battlefield Country Park and a disease resistant elm planted at Market Bosworth Country Park. Further tree planting was carried out at Market Bosworth Park with funding from the local community.
11. Throughout the winter months, the programme of Rhododendron clearance on certain areas of Beacon Hill was continued. This non-native species rapidly colonises areas of the park if not kept in check. It has been very gratifying to

see heather and gorse seedlings and other pioneer species already recolonising the cleared areas.

12. Grassland Habitats – a number of successful wildflower meadows at Beacon Hill, Oakthorpe Colliery, Market Bosworth Country Park and Watermead Country Park continue to be managed. The Trent Rivers Trust Botanica World Wildlife Federation United Kingdom Pollinators Project has now concluded and there are now some stunning areas of grassland restored at Watermead. A grassland restoration scheme has also been developed for Market Bosworth Country Park, which is suitable for selling biodiversity net gain units.
13. Visitor facilities at Beacon Hill Country Park have been improved with refurbishments made to the toilet blocks. At Broombriggs Farm, with funding from the Charnwood Living Landscapes project, the resilience of the car park has been improved, through new grass matting, allowing greater access throughout the year. The Council is also working with Buzzing Roots and the local community in Woodhouse Eaves to explore how access to the windmill building onsite can be improved.
14. Watermead Country Park saw the installation of new play equipment around King Lear's Lake, as well as new signed walking and running trails on the park.
15. At Broombriggs Farm, Shenton Station and Bosworth Battlefield new car parking machines were installed to replace the extremely old models. This has also allowed an hours-based tariff to be adopted on these sites, mirroring that in place at Beacon Hill and Market Bosworth Country Parks.
16. Throughout the year, there has been an extensive programme of events and engagement activities on the sites, ranging from early morning bird walks at Watermead Country Park and Dragonfly walks at Snibston and Lount, through to Half term nature play at Market Bosworth Country Park. Snibston has B-Buddies Cycle Club regularly run sessions plus the Snibston Heritage Trust run regular tours at Snibston Colliery Park. A Wellbeing week was held at Watermead in February with painting, wood sculpture creation, tree planting and guided walks.
17. Parkrun continues to be popular with events held throughout the year at Watermead, Market Bosworth and Beacon Hill.
18. A significant new event for the Country Parks service was the 'Up to the Beacon Sculpture Trail'. This ran from 10 June to 17 September and was coordinated by ArtSpace Loughborough. The project employed 14 local artists to create 37 works and installations which were sited along the 2.2km countryside trail. Some works resulted from direct commissions to artists and some works were co-created in community outreach sub-projects. The trail was centred around the West Beacon Plantation next to the upper car park. The project was based on the theme 'Harmony and Healing for Planet and People'. It included a varied programme of arts activities aimed to promote personal and community well-being and increase awareness of environmental sustainability and draw links between the two. The outreach programme enabled vulnerable people, and

young people from areas of multiple deprivation, to co-create artworks with professional artists that were exhibited as an integrated part of the programme. It is estimated that over 24,000 visitors took part in the trail.

19. A Green Flag Award was received in 2023 for Beacon Hill, Market Bosworth, Snibston and, for the first time, Watermead Country Park.
20. All of this work is only possible because of the dedication of a small team of Country Parks rangers, supported by over 100 volunteers. These volunteers support the Council with a variety of tasks from acting as wardens on 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. A new woodfuel group was set up at Beacon Hill, to help the Council with woodland management work and there is also a very helpful partnership with the probation service at Snibston Colliery Park. This has helped the Council to resurface paths, maintain flower beds and keep the mountain bike trail's vegetation under control, alongside many other tasks.
21. Income into the service was below target in 2023/24 due to a variety of factors including a significant amount of damage caused to the car parking machine at Beacon Hill Country Park and malfunctioning machines in other parks.
22. The financial position for 2024/25 is looking more robust, with higher than budgeted visitor numbers at key sites. Unfortunately, significant vandalism to the car parking machine at Watermead Country Park will see income impacted until this can be replaced.

Looking forward to 2024/25

23. It is the 50th anniversary of the Country Parks service this year, so a large social media campaign with historic images occurred during the Love Parks week which ran from 26 July 2024 to 5 August 2024 and engaged with 33,000 online users.
24. Playground works are planned for Market Bosworth Country Park, resurfacing the play area working with Bosworth Rotary Club. At Broombriggs Farm new surfaced paths are planned. Livestock will also be added to the herd at Beacon Hill.
25. The process of exploring the longer-term future for Broombriggs Farm has begun and the Council has received some seedcorn funding to enable a better understanding of the current habitat and biodiversity onsite, as well as how it can be better managed.
26. Work with the Trent Rivers Trust has begun to mitigate flood damage at Beacon and downstream areas through installing leaky dams, new pond, wet areas and swales.

27. A new Country Parks website was launched on 14 June 2024 and is available at www.leicscountryparks.org.uk.

Resource Implications

28. There are no additional resource implications for the service at this time.
29. The Director of Corporate Resources has been consulted on this report.

Conclusion

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

Background papers

Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy:

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

Tree Management Strategy:

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

Report to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 7 June 2023 – Biodiversity Enhancements in Leicestershire Country Parks.

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ielListDocuments.aspx?CId=1292&MIId=7149&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality Implications

31. There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Human Rights Implications

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

Environmental Implications

33. The Country Park Service continues to deliver against wider Council policies through the management of its land holdings for the benefit of wildlife and people. The service works to create, enhance and maintain biodiversity found within the varying habitats found within the Councils country parks. The Council's parks are an exemplar of how wildlife and people can coexist and are a refuge for delicate habitat types such as heathland, wetlands and woodland.

Health Implications

34. The Council's parks are a resource for residents for physical wellbeing, but also mental wellbeing, allowing visitors to connect with nature within a safe and accessible parks environment. The benefits of positive mental health through accessing greenspaces came to the forefront during the pandemic, and this trend in usage of green spaces continues. There is further scope to explore the social and economic benefit of "green social prescribing" that the Council's parks provide as therapeutic alternatives to traditional treatments.

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