



**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 10 SEPTEMBER 2025**

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 the Cabinet in May 2020 and runs from 2019 to 2029.
3. The Tree Management Strategy was approved by the Cabinet in March 2020 and runs from 2020 to 2025.
4. At its meeting in September 2024, 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 2024/25

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

Car numbers	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Beacon Hill	155,433	131845	133730	154770	153631	106042
Market Bosworth	47,475	47402	48093	45915	42916	26277
Watermead	5117	29761	29417	30199	26925	19392
Snibston	85,521	51,012				

8. These four 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.
9. Car parking numbers at Watermead Country Park have been heavily impacted by the vandalism of the car parking system in March 2024. A full replacement of the system is underway and the opportunity has been taken to change the previous pay on entry system for an Automatic Numberplate Recognition System that will allow payment on exit. The system has been installed since February 2025 and is ready for operation. However, there have been significant delays from Openreach in creating a connection to the site that means the system is still not operational. This has meant that for the financial year 2024/25 there was no income taken at Watermead Country Park and projected income is reduced in 2025.
10. Flooding remains a challenge at Watermead Country Park, with 9 flood events throughout the year, 5 being severe enough to warrant the closure of the country park. There was less infrastructure damage compared to previous years, but the effects of litter and silt on the park are significant and take up a lot of time for Rangers to rectify. From September 2024, 460 bags of flood-related rubbish were collected from the park.
11. A Countryside Stewardship Woodland Improvement agreement is in place with Defra (Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs)

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, rangers and volunteers have undertaken thinning works and contractors have started work at Bagworth Heath and will start at Sheet Hedges and Jubilee Wood in September 2025.

12. 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. The rate of recovery of areas previously covered by rhododendron has been surprising, with heather, gorse and scrub moving to cover the areas.
13. Visitor facilities continue to be improved on our sites. At Market Bosworth Country Park we added a 'Scrub Stop' dog wash facility and the installation of new seating and improvements to the play area surfacing.
14. In partnership with the National Forest Company, we have seen the resurfacing and improvement of paths around the Ashby Woulds Trail and the Ashby Canal from Conkers to Donisthorpe Woodland Park.
15. Throughout the year, there has been an extensive programme of events and engagement activities on the sites, ranging from livestock walks at Beacon Hill and Dragonfly walks at Bagworth Heath. Snibston has B-Buddies Cycle Club which regularly run sessions plus the Snibston Heritage Trust which runs regular tours at Snibston Colliery Park.
16. Parkrun continues to be popular with events held throughout the year at Watermead, Market Bosworth and Beacon Hill. At Watermead, over 11,000 participants have completed just under 48,000 parkruns since starting in September 2021.
17. To mark the 50th anniversary of the Country Parks service, 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.
18. Working with Froglife, new ponds have been reinstated and created at Bosworth Battlefield, Market Bosworth Country Park and Donington le Heath Country Park to improve habitat for great crested newts.
19. Working with the Trent Rivers Trust, a scheme has been delivered to install leaky dams, a new pond, wet areas and swales at Beacon Hill Country Park. The intention is that this scheme will help to slow the flow of water in the catchment areas around Loughborough. These works were funded by Trent Rivers Trust but costs were minimal, when

compared to traditional flood management. There are also wildlife and ecological benefits to the wider Beacon Hill site.

20. A new Country Parks website (www.leicscountryparks.org.uk) was launched on 14 June 2024. Since launch, the site has attracted 109,273 users.
21. This wide range of work has only been possible because of the dedication of a small team of Country Parks Rangers, supported by over 174 volunteers. These volunteers support the County Council with a variety of tasks from acting as wardens on sites, to litter picking and carrying out significant pieces of environmental conservation activities as part of larger teams. A number of the activities listed above would also not be possible without the support of volunteers. Corporate volunteering continues to grow.
22. The overall objective for the service is to return a cost-neutral financial position. Disappointingly, income into the service was below target in 2024/25, predominantly due to the damage caused to the car parking machine at Watermead Country Park.
23. The financial position for 2025/26 will also be reduced whilst the Service await the final elements to bring the replacement Watermead system online.

Work to date and looking forward in 2025/26

24. A Fotheringhay Oak was planted by the Chairman at Bosworth Battlefield to celebrate Richard III, kindly donated by Barcham Trees. In addition, a number of trees were planted at Market Bosworth Country park, sponsored by local residents.
25. The café at Beacon Hill was opened in 2019 and has been operated by the Council since then. After the success of outsourcing café operations at Snibston Colliery Park, a new operator has been appointed for the Beacon Hill café who will be commencing operation in September 2025.
26. At Broombriggs Farm there are improved stoned footpaths, connecting Woodhouse Eaves and Beacon Hill and a small dog exercise area.
27. Beacons were lit at Bosworth Battlefield and Beacon Hill to mark VE and VJ Day.
28. Another 'Up to the Beacon Sculpture Trail' is currently underway and runs until 21 September. Once again, it is 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.

29. A Green Flag Award, the benchmark international standard for publicly accessible parks and green spaces in the United Kingdom and around the world, was received in 2025 for Beacon Hill, Market Bosworth, Snibston and Watermead Country Park.
30. Work has been conducted with a consultant to explore the longer-term future for Broombriggs Farm, with seed corn funding from Natural England. This has helped us to better appreciate the current habitat and biodiversity onsite, as well as options for how it can be managed more sustainably.

Resource Implications

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

Conclusion

33. 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 – 9 September 2024 – Annual Review of Leicestershire Country Parks

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1292&MId=7645&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality Implications

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

Human Rights Implications

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

Environmental Implications

36. 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 Council's 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

37. 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.

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