



**ADULTS AND CULTURAL SERVICES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 7 SEPTEMBER 2026**

ANNUAL REVIEW OF LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTRY PARKS

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ADULTS AND CULTURAL
SERVICES**

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 2019 – 2029. Approved by the Cabinet in May 2020.
3. The Tree Management Strategy 2026 – 2031. Approved by the Cabinet in July 2026.
4. At its meeting in September 2024, the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny 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 service vision is "To have great parks that improve the quality of life for Leicestershire's communities and visitors". This guides service delivery and recognises the role country parks and open spaces play in supporting the Council to achieve key strategy outcomes around health, education, biodiversity and the environment.
6. The strategy sets out six destination parks: Beacon Hill Country Park, Broombriggs Farm, Watermead Country Park, Snibston Colliery Park, Bosworth Battlefield and Market Bosworth Country Park, alongside 12 secondary parks: Donington le Heath Country Park, Jubilee Wood, Sheet Hedges Wood, Burrough Hill Country Park, Sarah's Wood, Donisthorpe Woodland Park, Saltersford Valley Picnic Areas, Bagworth Heath Woods, New Lount Nature Reserve, Oakthorpe Picnic Area,

Ashby Woulds Heritage Trails, Brampton Valley Way. The six 'destination' parks attract visitors from further afield, as well as catering for the local community.

7. Three parks form part of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), these are 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), these are the Reed Bed Nature Reserve at Watermead Country Park; Moira Junction; Grange Nature Reserve at Snibston Colliery Park; New Lount Nature Reserve and Saltersford Valley. LNRs are sites chosen by the local authority as particularly significant for their wildlife, geology, education, or enjoyment.

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Visitor events and facilities

8. 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 butterfly walks at Market Bosworth. At Snibston Colliery Park B-Buddies Cycle Club runs regular mountain bike sessions for young people and the Snibston Heritage Trust runs regular tours.
9. The 'Up to the Beacon Sculpture Trail' ran from 28 June to 21 September 2025, co-ordinated by ArtSpace Loughborough. The project employed 12 local artists to create 25 sculptures and installations, sited along 2.5km of paths at Beacon Hill. Some works came from direct commissions, and some were co-created through community outreach projects. The trail was centred around the West Beacon Plantation next to the upper car park and based on the theme 'Thriving with Nature'. It included a varied programme of arts activities aimed to promote personal and community well-being and increase awareness of environmental sustainability and drawing 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 15,000 visitors enjoyed the art trail. The project was supported by Country Parks Service, Charnwood Arts, Intelligent Energy, The Charnwood Forest Landscape Partnership Scheme and Charnwood Borough Council.
10. The café at Beacon Hill opened in 2019, initially operated by the Council, and has since been successfully leased. The new operator opened in August 2025, investing in layout changes, new furniture, colour scheme and the menu offer, all have been received well by visitors.
11. Parkrun continues to be popular with events held throughout the year at Beacon Hill, Donisthorpe Woodland Park (Conkers), Market Bosworth and Watermead Country Parks.

Park Run site	Events 2025	Finishers 2025
Beacon	52	7,969
Conkers	54	23,500
Market Bosworth	51	8,608
Watermead	47	17,097
TOTAL	204	57,174

12. Other organised and licenced runs feature heavily at Watermead, Beacon and Bosworth Battlefield and these sites hosted a variety of league, charity and fun runs during 2025.
13. Visitor facilities continue to be improved on our sites. Principal examples include a new secure dog exercise area at Broombriggs Farm Country Park, new natural play area equipment at Beacon Hill and investment in path resurfacing works across the parks network.
14. A new Country Parks website (www.leicscountryparks.org.uk) was launched on 14 June 2024. Since launch, the site has attracted 109,273 users. The Country Parks Facebook account has over 9,900 followers. The most popular posts have a reach of between 50,000 and 130,000.
15. It is estimated that the Council's Country Parks receive about one million visitors per annum, however, there is no current mechanism to measure total visitor numbers. Historically, the service has relied on data from sites with automated car parking infrastructure to provide car numbers. This partial measure does not capture visits to sites where this data cannot be collected, or visits to sites by means other than car.
16. Car parking data for the past 5 years, including 2026 to date, is shown in the table below.

Site name	Mode of parking	2026 (31 July 26)	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Beacon Hill	Pay on Exit	93,302	150,793	155,433	131,845	133,730	154,770	153,631
Market Bosworth	Pay on Exit	30,576	52,501	47,475	47,402	48,093	45,915	42,916
Watermead ¹	Pay on Exit	25,307	N/A	5,117	29,761	29,417	30,199	26,925
Snibston ²	Pay on Exit	18,532	20,309	85,521	51,012	DNC	DNC	DNC
Burrough Hill ³	Pay and Display	-	3,220	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC
Bosworth Battlefield ³	Pay and Display	-	17,073	16,634	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC
Broombriggs Farm ³	Pay and Display	-	3,017	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC
Shenton ³	Pay and Display	-	6,374	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC	DNC

Total			253,287	310,810	260,020	211,240	230,884	223,427
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17. The parking system at Watermead was vandalised in 2024 and this accounts for the significant variance in 2024 and 2025. A new Automatic Numberplate Recognition System (APRN) was installed during 2025 and was fully operational in February 2026. ² The figure for Snibston in 2024 appears incorrect. The original data has been lost and cannot be validated. ³ These figures are an estimate and based on total income received divided by average spend. It excludes season ticket data.
18. The service is well supported by 147 Volunteers, who contributed 3,346 hours of work over 822 sessions in 2025. Volunteers undertake a range of duties from habitat management such as tree thinning, strimming, and hedge cutting to butterfly transects, gate locking, furniture building and the emptying of dog bins. These activities make a huge contribution to the successful delivery of the Country Parks Service and volunteer input could not be replicated by the ranger service alone.

Flood prevention

19. Flooding remains a challenge at Watermead Country Park, with eight flood events throughout the year, four 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 2025, 460 bags of flood-related rubbish were collected from the park
20. Working with the Trent Rivers Trust, natural flood mitigation measures were installed at Beacon Hill as part of a wider programme to protect residents within the Wood Brook catchment area of Loughborough. These works were funded by Trent Rivers Trust and costs were minimal, when compared to traditional flood management. There are also wildlife and ecological benefits to the wider Beacon Hill site. Leaky dams, swales and new ponds successfully caught, diverted and held up the flow of water over the winter of 2025.

Management and Conservation

21. A Countryside Stewardship Woodland Improvement agreement is in place with the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) until 31 December 2026 for woodlands within most of the Council's parks. This provides funding for activity that builds upon the principles within the Council's Tree Management Strategy and promotes excellence in 'silviculture' (the care and cultivation of woodlands), increasing biodiversity and making woodlands more resilient to pests and diseases. During 2025 rangers and volunteers have undertaken thinning, coppicing and veteran tree works across sites. Contractors have completed works at Bagworth Heath, Jubilee and Sheet Hedges Woods.

22. 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. The area of rhododendron is being retained and carefully contained within the SSSI due to popular visitor appeal.
23. 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. These paths have shown great resilience to the wet winter of 2025 allowing for year-round access for visitors to the area
24. Paths around the Bosworth Battlefield Sundial and Market Bosworth arboretum were also resurfaced to improve visitor access over the summer of 2025
25. Habitat for great crested newts has been improved through new and reinstated ponds at Bosworth Battlefield, Market Bosworth and Donington le Heath Country Parks, these have developed and blended within the landscape. Surveys are planned during 2026/27 to review their effectiveness.
26. The service actively balances public access with the needs of wildlife at Beacon Hill and Jewels Hill between the months of April and August. This approach continues to show wildlife benefit to nesting birds and, by inference, other related heathland associated species. Reports indicate continued protection to the area will benefit red listed birds and the SSSI.
27. At Broombriggs Farm works to the car park, path and dog exercise area were completed. This was funded through the Charnwood Forest Landscape Partnership Scheme. The new dog exercise area has been a local success for visitors and aims to offer safe spaces for visitors to exercise and train their dogs away from ecologically sensitive areas of Charnwood Forest.
28. Beacons were lit at Bosworth Battlefield and Beacon Hill to mark VE and VJ Day.
29. Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) works at Beacon Hill continue to improve the Heathland environment, delivered in part through a herd of primitive breed cattle, sheep and alpacas. In 2025 new Highlands and Longhorn Cattle were purchased from local breeders to supplement the herd and its efforts in naturally controlling scrub and bracken growth for the benefit of heather and other wildflower species, as well as the fauna it supports. The highland cattle attract widespread visitor attention.

30. This wide range of work has only been possible because of the dedication of a small team of 15 Country Parks Rangers, supported by 2 casual Wardens.

Significant achievements/Areas to note

31. Green Flag Awards were received in 2025 for Beacon Hill, Market Bosworth, Snibston and Watermead Country Parks. Green Flag is the internal benchmark international for publicly accessible parks and green spaces in the United Kingdom and around the world.
32. Country Parks Byelaws were ratified by the Secretary of State and came into effect 2025. The updated Byelaws capture recent technological developments such as E-bikes and drones as well as BBQ use and restrictions to dogs inside play areas. The Byelaws are published on the Country Parks website.

Looking forward to 2026/27

33. It was confirmed in July 2026 that new Green Flag Awards have been received Beacon Hill, Market Bosworth, Snibston and Watermead Country Park.
34. Work to explore the longer-term future for Broombriggs Farm, with funding from Natural England has helped us to better appreciate the current habitat and biodiversity onsite and will inform the development of options for how it can be managed more sustainably.
35. A review of the 10-year woodland management plan is underway with a view to submit application for a 10-year Woodland management stewardship scheme. A review of Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) is also planned.
36. A temporary replacement bridge over the river soar at Watermead, opened May 2026. This allows non-vehicular access between the Syston and Birstall sides of the site, whilst the main bridge is closed.
37. The new ANPR systems at Watermead was successfully implemented in February 2026 and income is in line with projections. The service is now looking to install ANPR at Beacon and Market Bosworth to replace the existing ageing systems, with a more reliable provision.
38. Path works to Watermead and car park improvements, line marking completed spring 2026, focusing on park run routes. Opportunity for further repairs and improvements will be reviewed throughout the year.
39. New parking tariffs were introduced in April 2026, as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. Car parking numbers have risen by 10% on the same period last year. A review of season ticket pricing is underway.

40. The service will explore how to capture more accurate visitor data to better understand who is and isn't using our parks and help inform future developments.
41. In May 2026 the Country Parks Service moved to Adults and Cultural Services Department.

Resource Implications

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

Conclusion

44. 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/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1292&MId=7645&Ver=4>

Report to the Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee 10 September 2025: Annual Review of Leicestershire Country Parks

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/mgChooseDocPack.aspx?ID=7909>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality Implications

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

Human Rights Implications

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

Environmental Implications

47. 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

48. The Council's parks are a resource for residents for physical and 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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