



SCRUTINY COMMISSION: 27 JANUARY 2020

COUNTRY PARKS AND OPEN SPACES STRATEGY 2019-2029

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to invite members of the committee to comment on the draft strategy (Appendix A) which sets out the approach for the management of the County Council's Country Parks including the Country Parks Action Plan (Appendix B).

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. 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).
3. 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 management of its country parks accords with and supports this.
4. The Medium Term Financial Strategy 2019/20-2022/23 (MTFS) was approved by the Council in February 2019. It was noted that delivery of the MTFS required savings of £74.5m, £19.9m of which remained to be identified. The draft Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy aims to reduce costs and increase income where possible, for these assets to support the Council's objectives.
5. The Council will use the Strategy as an opportunity to promote sustainability and help alleviate the impact of climate change and pollution. In the short-term, improved access to and across parks for cycleways and walkways will contribute to carbon reduction.
6. 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.

7. The draft Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy was presented to Cabinet on 22 October 2019 and officers were authorised to progress work on an action plan for the six destination parks and for the Strategy and action plans to be submitted for consideration by the Scrutiny Commission.

Background

8. 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.
9. Although parks and green spaces are enjoyed by many, they are not a statutory service; the Authority is not obliged by law to provide and maintain country parks and open spaces. However, the draft 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.
10. Parks and open spaces make a great contribution to maintaining health and wellbeing, provide places that can bring people together, act as a focal point for community activity and inspire a sense of place and identity. It is also widely accepted that they can have a vital role in the regeneration of an area and even increase the value of homes.
11. The Council is responsible for a network of country parks and open spaces that include wildlife sites, lakes, wetland grasslands, woodlands and other accessible countryside spaces. The sites differ greatly in size and composition, but together provide an array of locations that have a diverse range of ecological, cultural, recreational and historical significance.
12. Whilst there is a clear commitment to deliver improvements, there are also challenges. Parks are not a core service and 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.
13. 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 Country Park – 28.95 ha (hectares)
 - Beacon Hill – 123.83 ha
 - Broombriggs Farm – 70.34 ha
 - Watermead – 99.97 ha

- Market Bosworth – 35.43 ha
 - Bosworth Battlefield Country Park – 13.37 ha.
14. Although the provision of country parks is not a statutory service or a council priority, it is recognised that they are a key asset that can enhance the place and support the delivery of many of the council’s strategic objectives. Whilst the action plan focuses on the six main destination parks it does not mean that the smaller parks and open spaces will be neglected.
15. Indeed, Leicestershire’s secondary parks and open spaces, whilst not having the same scope as the destination parks are still an important part of its green infrastructure and will be maintained as such. The appointment of the new Head of Country Parks will provide the additional capability and capacity to develop further plans and to seek available grant funding.

Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy - Vision

16. The Council’s vision for its parks and open spaces is a simple one:

“To have great parks that improve the quality of life for Leicestershire’s communities and visitors”.

Whilst acknowledging that its country parks service is under continued pressure as a non-statutory service the Council has ambitions to do more with reduced funding and will be looking at more innovative ways to maintain and expand its country parks services.

17. The core principles underlying the Strategy’s vision are summarised as:
- Whilst not a statutory service, parks are an asset that can contribute to the wider objectives of the Council.
 - The Council is committed to making its country parks and open spaces safe and accessible.
 - The Strategy will develop plans that will be shaped with elected members (councillors), officers across all key services, partners and communities.
 - Volunteering and community engagement will be integral to the Strategy’s delivery
 - The Council’s parks will become sustainable through income generated and other funding it will seek to access.
18. As mentioned above, the Strategy makes a distinction between the main sites and lesser parks and open spaces, with the former to be developed as a network of destinations that not only cater for the local community but will attract people from further afield.
19. Adopting a more strategic approach to the development of its country parks and open spaces will also enable the Council to think more innovatively and to consider ways of encouraging organisations to implement their social value through sponsorship and investment.

Proposals/Options in the draft Strategy

Finances

20. The Strategy establishes a framework within which the Authority can expand the facilities within parks to improve people's quality of life, accepting that substantial funding will be required against a backdrop of financial challenge and diminished funding. For this reason, a long-term view is adopted, recognising that whilst there is a clear direction of travel, the necessary changes will be incremental.
21. Alongside other non-statutory services the Council's parks budget has had to bear a share of financial cuts through austerity. Economic sustainability needs to be balanced with ecological considerations and maintaining parks as restful places, so the Council will selectively pursue other sources of income including thorough increased catering, car park charging, and more events and activities.
22. Work will be undertaken with the Council's Commercial Services arm to encourage commercial organisations to exercise their corporate social responsibility through sponsorship and investment, and to secure more funding through advertising and marketing.
23. In 2019 the Council opened its first country parks café at Beacon Hill. This has been very successful and received a lot of positive comments from visitors. It is intended to open another café at Snibston in 2020, and thereafter in the other destination parks, where possible.
24. Income arising from the Strategy will be reinvested in the Council's parks and open spaces and will be used to preserve, maintain and develop other facilities within the parks.

Community Volunteering and Partnerships

25. The Council believes that through volunteering, community engagement and partnership working it can preserve, conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and natural heritage of its country parks and open spaces. The best way to achieve the desired outcomes is to work in partnership with local communities, and other organisations such as the National Forest Company and the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. In developing more detailed plans, the Authority will aspire to work more closely with residents, elected members and parish councils, for example encouraging the creation of more "friends" groups and providing more volunteering opportunities.
26. The country parks service has a long-established relationship of working with volunteers. The skills, time and expertise of volunteers has made a huge contribution, but service cuts have increasingly affected the Council's ability to engage with more volunteers. At a future point, it is intended to appoint a

volunteer co-ordinator in order to help develop a more comprehensive and focused volunteering capacity.

27. It is intended as work progresses that the Strategy will be utilised as a framework within which the Council can develop its volunteering capacity and capability further, and to ensure that its plans are aligned with other priorities around, education and learning and health and wellbeing.

Safety and Accessibility

28. The Council will continue its commitment to provide a park ranger service to all its 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.

Consultation

29. The “Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019/ 2029” is a high-level document of intent and as such is being referred to the Scrutiny Commission and as it underpins other strategic priorities it will be the subject of ongoing internal consultation and refinement to ensure that it aligns with other strategic plans.
30. There will be ongoing dialogue with officers from the Council’s Public Health Department about organising sponsored walks, and park runs, as well as other outdoor events involving schools, clubs and local communities; also consultation with colleagues from Environment & Transportation Department to ensure that activities align with the County Council’s Environmental Strategy.

Action Plans

31. Whilst opportunities are many and possibilities may appear to be limitless, the financial challenges facing the council continue to increase, therefore, the action plans need to be based on specific measurable and realistic actions. The ambition that underpins these actions will hopefully generate income to fund further initiatives and progress will be incremental. A summary of the key actions are set out in the paragraphs below.
32. The development of the café at Beacon Hill in 2019 has already increased visitor numbers and provided a more attractive venue for families. The key actions relating to this park will be the creation of more family friendly activities and attractions and the development of more signposted walking trails and the establishment of park runs. There are also plans to enhance Beacon Hill’s Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status and to further develop the management plans with Natural England.

33. Plans for the development of Snibston have commenced with the developer, Fortem, arriving on site in January. These plans include the creation of a café, a cycleway which will improve connectivity and link with the National Cycleway Route 52, a children's play area and a mountain bike trail. The site will open by August 2020 and will complete phase 1 of the project that will help to regenerate the area and reinvigorate the Country Park.
34. Market Bosworth Country Park is a particularly beautiful location which contains a mixture of open grassland, parkland and woodland. Improvements to create new pathways and resurface existing ones were carried out in 2019. Work was also carried out to drain and clear the stew ponds and additional trees were planted to expand the arboretum. There are specific actions to further develop the arboretum in 2020 and to create a celebration wood to encourage more tree planting. Notice has also been given to a tenant farmer and adjacent land has been reclaimed and this will be integrated into the parks landscape and rewilded.
35. Broombriggs Farm was donated to the County Council by the Freer family in 1970. The limitations on parking have undoubtedly restricted access to this picturesque location. The specific actions relating to this park will focus on increasing the car parking facility, expanding the orchard and working with partners to develop agroforestry schemes.
36. Watermead Country Park has a northern and a southern area which are managed by the County and City Councils respectively. The park has significant ecological value but requires investment to improve car parking arrangements and provide catering. These are aspirations that will have to wait until at least 2021. In the short term the action plan will focus on developing the nature reserves and continuing to preserve the habitats.
37. Finally, the appointment of the new Head of Country Parks will provide the capacity to work more closely with internal heritage colleagues and external stakeholders to develop a programme of events. There are also specific plans to upgrade car parking and improve signage and access, including walking routes to the Shenton railway line.

Resource Implications

38. In 2018/19 the total expenditure on country parks was £770,000, and the total income was £440,000 resulting in an overall net cost of £330,000.

Timetable for Decisions

39. Following feedback from the Scrutiny Commission, the final Strategy and action plan will be submitted to the Cabinet for approval in March 2020.

Conclusion

40. Its country parks and open spaces are part of what makes Leicestershire a great place to live. These are exciting times and the parks and open spaces are

a key part of Leicestershire's future. The Strategy will provide a framework and deliver the impetus for their maintenance and improvement.

41. 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.

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 20 February 2019: MTFs 2019/20 – 2022/23

<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=5125&Ver=4>

Report to the Cabinet on 22 October 2019: Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019-2029

<http://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=5606&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

42. None.

Equality and Human Rights Implications

43. There are no equality or human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report. Although the paper 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 (EHRIA).

List of Appendices

Appendix A - Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2019-2029

Appendix B - Action Plans

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