



**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 9 NOVEMBER 2021**

**LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTRY PARKS AND OPEN SPACES
STRATEGY AND THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19**

**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 Country Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and recent actions to deliver the strategy in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. The Strategy contributes to two of the Council's Strategic Plan 2018-2022 outcomes, Wellbeing and Opportunity and Great Communities, as well as a number of objectives within the Council's Environment Strategy.
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. The Strategy set out five core principles:
 - i. Country parks and open spaces are not a statutory service, but they are a county council asset that can contribute to the wider objectives of the council including health, education, biodiversity and the environment

- ii. Parks and open spaces will be safe and accessible for citizens and visitors and central to everyday community life
 - iii. The strategy will develop a vision that will be shaped with elected members, officers across all key services, partners and communities
 - iv. Volunteering, community engagement and partnership participation are integral to delivery of the strategy
 - v. Our parks will become sustainable through the income that we generate through them and funding that we access
6. The Strategy also set out four priority themes, with actions to deliver them. Finally, it briefly detailed actions to take place on our six destination parks.

Priority themes and some highlights delivered in the past 18 months

Provide a network of safe and accessible parks

- 7. The new Snibston Colliery Park, which opened in December 2020, has seen considerable investment in cycling and walking routes throughout the country park, with a new café, sitting alongside a flagship play area.
- 8. An improvement plan at Watermead Country Park will upgrade key infrastructure in the park, starting in November 2021, including the main entrances to the site, site signage and visitor interpretation. An important new feature will be a revamped play trail around King Lear's Lake.

Ensure that the biodiversity, heritage and landscape values of all sites are conserved and developed

- 9. Three of the Council's parks form part of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (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.
- 10. 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). Local Nature Reserves are sites chosen by the local authority as particularly significant for their wildlife, geology, education, or enjoyment (without disturbing wildlife).
- 11. A Woodland Management Plan for woodlands within most of the Council's parks is now in place. 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.

12. Grassland management is also a focus, with two pasture fields being added to Market Bosworth Country Park. These will be managed with an annual 'cut and collect' to promote the growth of wildflowers. A new grassland project at Watermead Country Park will also see the restoration of grassland areas, through funding from the Trent Rivers Trust Botanica WWFUK Pollinators Project Grant.
13. At Beacon Hill, the heathland restoration work continues with a pilot closure of a small area of the park at Jewels Hill from March to July 2021 to encourage ground nesting birds and other wildlife associated with a heathland habitat. Officers are currently evaluating the results of this pilot.
14. At Snibston Colliery Park, Donington le Heath Country Park and Bagworth Heath Country Park, pond restoration works and heathland improvements will be taking place this winter, as part of a Council biodiversity net gain scheme.

Ensure widespread engagement and participation of citizens, communities and partners

15. Parkrun has now started at Watermead Country Park, with more than 230 participants taking part at its inaugural parkrun event. Others are also planned for other sites around the county.
16. The Country Parks service is part of a Green Social Prescribing pilot, run with colleagues in Public Health and launching on 8 November 2021. This will work with Social Prescribers, including link workers and local area coordinators in two areas of the county to link people to nature-based interventions and activities to support their physical and mental health
17. Around 110 active volunteers support the service across almost all of the sites.

Develop a sustainable financial model for growth – including grant funding, sponsorship and greater commercial income

18. The Council has been able to increase its commercial income through greater use of refreshment concessions on its parks – giving people opportunity for a drink or light refreshment, whilst bringing income into the service.
19. Funding has recently been received from bodies including British Cycling, Trent Rivers Trust Botanica WWFUK Pollinators Project Grant, and the Angling Trust, to develop activities and improve our sites.

Recovery of Country Parks Service from COVID-19 pandemic

20. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, car parks in country parks were closed. They reopened in May 2020 and for the rest of the financial year, visitor numbers were the highest ever experienced in our parks. The table below gives an indication of the level of increase for some of our major parks.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Watermead visitors	63852	64493	58765	78000
Market Bosworth visitors	45297	52159	48005	112000
Beacon Hill visitors	164589	183776	229638	407000

21. The large volume of visitors put a particular strain on the service, both in terms of car parks frequently reaching their capacity in autumn and winter 2020, but also in high levels of wear and tear to park infrastructure and increases in litter and dog waste.
22. Although the larger visitor numbers resulted in greater income into the service from car parking revenue and café income, expenditure was significantly higher with requirements for additional staffing for wardens in parks, as well as cleaners for toilets and other facilities. The lack of volunteers during this period and increased visitor management workload for the rangers, meant that timetables for environmental work programmes inevitably slipped.
23. One interesting by-product of the decline in visitors during the first lockdown, was the increase in wildlife in unexpected places on our parks – examples included a family of otters at Watermead Country Park and ground nesting birds in parts of Beacon Hill.
24. Visitor numbers have now reduced to a more manageable level, although still remain elevated compared to 2019/20.
25. Watermead Country Park has become a focus for the way in which the County and City remembers the COVID-19 pandemic with a memorial trail of trees and benches stretching from the northern to southern ends of the park. It was officially opened in June 2021.

Conclusions

26. This report updates the Committee on the Country Parks Strategy and some of the actions undertaken to deliver the strategy. It also sets out the challenges to the service caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
27. 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 2019-2029](#)

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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