



Report to Communities & Localism Select Committee

Date:	28 February 2024
Title:	Country Parks Overview and Work Programme
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Recommendations:	For information – Members of the committee are invited to NOTE the details of the Country Parks operating model and work programme

1. Background

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire Council's four Country Parks were established under the 1968 Countryside Act between 1972 and 1990.
- 1.2 The Country Parks operate under a self-financing arrangement, meaning all costs required to manage and improve the sites must be generated from activities within the sites.
- 1.3 This report details the key activities that have been developed and implemented and future plans.

2. The Country Parks operating model

- 2.1 Buckinghamshire Council currently owns and operates four country parks in Wexham and Stoke Poges, the Ivers and Denham: Black Park Country Park (525 acres/213 hectares), Denham Country Park (69 acres/28 hectares), Langley Park Country Park (155 acres/63 hectares) and Thorney Park (52 acres/30 hectares).
- 2.2 Each park has a unique identity drawing on the site's particular attributes: Black Park's size and wilderness atmosphere, the historic landscape of Langley Park, the wetland attributes of Denham Country Park and the unique wildlife attributes (despite its industrial background) of Thorney Park.
- 2.3 There are no statutory responsibilities for the Council to provide Country Parks, however there are legal and operational responsibilities to manage these facilities appropriately. These include (but are not limited to) the Occupiers Liability Act, Health and Safety at Work Act (HASWA), Control of Substances

Hazardous to Health (COSHH), the Reservoirs Act, the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Badgers Act, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act. Each of these acts, and numerous others, have an impact on how the Country Parks must be managed.

2.4 Prior to the pandemic, visitor numbers across the Country Parks were relatively stable at around 1m visitors per annum, but this rose to 1.76m during 2020/21 when other leisure opportunities were constrained under the Covid restrictions. Visitor numbers have decreased since this peak, but still sit approximately 7% above pre-pandemic levels (as shown in Appendix 1).

2.5 A comprehensive visitor survey, completed in 2017, included an analysis of the customers using the parks at the time including group size, visitor mix by age, employment status, household income and an analysis of visitors' home postcodes. The postcode distribution maps in Appendix 2 show that Black Park has the widest draw, followed by Langley Park and then Denham.

A repeat of the 2017 survey will be completed in 2024 to analyse what impact changes to the sites over the last 7 years may have had on visitor perceptions and catchment areas.

2.6 Customer feedback remains consistently positive and the quarterly analysis of Google reviews shows overwhelmingly positive visitor reviews, with almost 94% positive (4/5 or 5/5) comments. Examples include:

"A place where at times anyone can be truly alone. A huge forest cut off from civilization only a few miles away from West London. Very grateful for this regional park."

"It's a beautiful adventure park, picnic spot, forest just at the edge of Slough and Langley. It has ample paid parking, if you are an adventure enthusiast or nature lover, this place is for you."

2.7 Income generation has always been a feature of the Country Parks operating model, with forestry and filming activities contributing to the core funding from the Council prior to the self-financing arrangements being introduced. Full self-financing was achieved from 2004/05 and since then, the financial position has been both sustained and improved through the successful development of the parks. The income achieved enables further investment into the facilities to deliver conservation activities, to ensure the parks remain attractive and enjoyable places to visit, and to support future income generation.

2.8 To guide the development of the parks, several studies have been commissioned and subsequently approved by Members, to provide a framework for

appropriate commercial developments in the Country Parks. The key features of these documents are summarised in Appendix 3 'Service on a page'.

- 2.9 Any developments/activities in Black Park or Langley Park must consider several covenants and historic Acts of Parliament that were enacted when the land was bought in 1946. The covenants, particularly, specify what these two parks can (and cannot) be used for, meaning that it is highly unlikely that the sites could be used for any other purpose apart from their current uses.
- 2.10 Alongside the commercial focus, the parks retain a strong community focus with high quality facilities and activities which are free of charge, including three quality play areas meeting Local Area Equipped for Play (LEAP) standards, picnic facilities, over 10 miles of surfaced tracks and hundreds of acres of parkland in which visitors can explore and play.
- 2.11 The Country Parks team also provide volunteering activities every week where visitors can engage with practical conservation tasks, as well as an award-winning 'Adopt a Patch' scheme which encourages individuals and families to adopt an area of a park and endeavour to keep it litter free.
- 2.12 The above are among many ways in which the parks contribute to wider Council priorities and agendas, from supporting people's health and wellbeing, to increasing public participation and connecting people to nature.

Current business arrangements and income generation

- 2.13 Since the introduction of the self-financing arrangements and associated commercial focus, the bigger parks have evolved to become visitor attractions as opposed to traditional country parks and they operate in the extremely competitive leisure market.
- 2.14 As an example, in 2008/09 the team secured a deal with Forest Adventure Ltd (trading as Go Ape) for a high ropes course at Black Park Country Park; following the success of the initial course additional features and attractions were introduced including forest segways, mountain bikes, junior tree-top adventure and the nets kingdom, in order to increase and maintain public interest in the parks. The Go Ape activities required the installation of catering and toilet facilities adjacent to these new facilities and these, coupled with a new high-quality caterer and exceptional high standards of management and maintenance, have been the catalyst for the transition from traditional Country Parks to visitor destinations.

Core Income

There are three main sources of income for the Country Parks: car parking, filming and commercial/residential leases. These activities are supported by other equally important but less profitable activities and arrangements, including forestry, events/education, grants and sales.

	Annual Income 2023/24
Car Parking	£776,173
Leases/Licences	£345,559
Filming	£282,760
Other	£93,802
Total	£1,498,294

- 2.15 Car parking charges are levied at the three Country Parks that have visitor facilities (toilets, catering and recreation facilities) and this is consistently the biggest source of income. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that car park pricing is a consideration for visitors, particularly in relation to other similar sites, and therefore it will be important to continue to monitor visitor reactions to any future price increases (although relatively small numbers, parking prices remain the biggest area of complaint in customer satisfaction analysis).
- 2.16 Leases and Licences - There are three main commercial tenants at the Country Parks: Forest Adventure Ltd (Go Ape), San Remo Catering and Groundwork South. There are also eight residential properties linked to staff 'service tenancies' that require staff to live on site for the better performance of their duties.
- 2.17 Filming - The Country Parks have a long history of filming and are reported as being the most filmed outdoor locations in the UK. With an adjoining boundary with Pinewood Studios, Black Park has been associated with location filming since the invention of the earliest mobile cameras in the 1920s. Filming continues to be a critical source of income for the Country Parks, but it can be inconsistent.

Other Income

- 2.18 Commercial forestry and timber sales – As well as being an amenity woodland, Black Park is a commercial forest, hardwoods and softwoods are routinely harvested producing high-quality timber from the site. This is a long-term investment and closely regulated through our woodland management plan which is approved by the Forestry Commission. Within the woodland management plan there are opportunities to remove certain species which

allow the principal crop to develop, this allows for supplementary income to be achieved through sales to the film industry for set dressing.

- 2.19 Grant Applications – historically countryside/parks management has been supported by European Agri/Environment scheme funding. Following Brexit these funding schemes have been gradually wound down while alternative schemes have been developed. The operational spatial/management plans and the woodland management plans mentioned above will be key to any future submissions for grant funding from the Government. The service maintains regular contact with regional advisors from the Forestry Commission and Natural England (NE) to monitor upcoming schemes and the options for applications to be submitted. The team also delivered a £3.1m restoration of the historic Langley Park estate, bringing a landscape reputedly designed by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown back to its former glory. The 10-year project restored key features of the estate including a collection of Rhododendrons of European significance.
- 2.20 Events and Education - A weekly pre-school ‘Tots in the Wood’ activity takes place at Black Park based around the Forest Schools initiative; this has been active for a number of years, initially through an external supplier and subsequently in house. This has recently been extended to provide sessions for home schooled children and children with special educational needs.
- 2.21 Additional public events, from self-guided trails to traditional guided walks, are delivered throughout the year and try to capture current trends, as well as more traditional events including Halloween trails, dinosaur trails and film walks. All events encourage outdoor exercise, are usually at least 2.5km long, and often have an educational theme linked to the activity e.g. the litter bug trail promoting reuse and recycling.

Financial Management

- 2.22 Since 2005/06 Country Parks have been net contributors to the Council’s General Fund budget which forms part of the Council’s Medium Term Financial Plan. Any funds generated above this annual income target are transferred into allocated reserves or to help offset wider corporate or service financial pressures. Reserves are used to deliver unforeseen/major maintenance projects (e.g. bridge repairs, play area replacements), income generation projects (e.g. new café building, car park extensions) or renewals (e.g. specialist site equipment and machinery).
- 2.23 The allocated reserves mean that the Country Parks can continue to operate sustainably within the commercial leisure market, providing regular improvements and developments at the sites without drawing on the Council’s pressured capital programme. Without the investments, it is unlikely that the

Country Parks would be able to keep pace with developments required to maintain their competitive edge within the leisure market.

3. Future work programme

- 3.1 Black Park Changing Places Toilet – this is a modular toilet and changing facility for adults with severe physical disabilities and is being delivered with core funding from Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC). This will be the first such unit in Buckinghamshire Council’s parks portfolio.

Funding: DLUHC £40k grant, Development reserve £35k

Target completion date: March 2024
- 3.2 Langley Park spatial plan and management plan – Following the completion of a spatial plan and an operational management plan for Black Park, it has always been the intent to deliver similar plans for all the Country Parks sites. These plans guide the operational management of the sites dividing the sites by landscape characteristics, visitor usage and conservation value. They are ‘live’ documents that can evolve as the environment, the economic climate and customer expectations change. The first draft of these documents for Langley Park was delivered to the team at the end of December and is currently under review.

Funding: Maintenance reserve £34k

Target completion date: March 2024
- 3.3 Forestry/woodland management plans - To facilitate operational management of the commercial woodlands at Black Park, Langley Park and Rowley Woods it is necessary to have a woodland management plan agreed with the Forestry Commission (FC). Despite early engagement with the FC through our consultants, the previous management plans have expired, and the new plans are yet to be approved.

Funding: Maintenance reserve £9k

Target completion date: March 2024
- 3.4 Langley Park Ha-Ha Wall – this historic feature linked to the Capability Brown inspired Langley Park estate was last repaired in 1994 where large sections of the wall were rebuilt is now in need of further work after the collapse of a large oak tree in 2019 and some subsidence of the 1994 repairs.

Funding: Maintenance reserve £20k

Target completion date: September 2024

3.5 Black Park Café facility - A new catering outlet with indoor seating, incorporating new toilet facilities, adjacent to Black Park Car Park and the Go Ape facilities at the Country Park. This facility replaces the outdoor kiosk and temporary toilets that have been in-situ since the establishment of a visitor hub centred around the Go Ape facilities. It draws together the key recreational activity hub and the parking facilities which will help to improve visitor attendance during the winter months.

Funding: Development Reserve £1.25m

Target completion date: March 2025

3.6 Black Park Lake Erosion mitigation - Black Park Lake is classified a raised reservoir under the 1974 Reservoirs Act, which requires formal annual and 10-year inspections of the earth bank dam. Issues of erosion along both the north and south banks of the lake have been identified and require a programme of remedial works to be completed; this will include the clearance of the degrading mature trees along these banks to facilitate access for the erosion mitigation works. Subject to gaining felling licences and budget constraints, works will commence in autumn 2024.

Funding: Maintenance reserve £145k

Target completion date: phase 1 - March 2025

3.7 Colne Valley Additional Mitigation Fund (CVAMF) - Following the use of Denham Country Park for HS2 enabling works the Parks have been successful in securing funding from the Colne Valley Addition Mitigation Fund for access and habitat improvements and a further £80k from HS2/National Grid for habitat enhancement focussing on protected species, namely Great Crested Newts and Water Voles. A dedicated project officer has been appointed and works will take place over the next two years.

Funding: CVAMF grant £196k (potentially increasing); National Grid grant £80k

Target completion date: phase 1 March 2025, phase 2 March 2026

3.8 New Country Park in Stoke Poges – This project is delivering a new country park following the importation of 80,000m³ of soils and sub-soils to create a new landscape feature based on the footprint of the former South Bucks Golf Academy. The income generated from the soil importation is funding the landscaping and the development of the facilities including parking, toilets, a café, various paths for walking and cycling, play areas and other visitor infrastructure.

3.9 Layout and landscaping of the site has been progressing well following the soil importation, and initial planting has been undertaken in some areas of the park

(where it will not be impacted by the other elements of construction). For both environmental and cost-efficiency reasons, it is now proposed to repurpose and extend the existing brick building on site (rather than demolition and construction of a new modular unit); the construction company are confirming planning requirements in order to provide confirmed completion dates.

Funding: soil importation £1.8m

Target completion date: late 2024/25

- 3.10 Little Marlow Lakes – Planning colleagues are continuing to work with Natural England around compliance with Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace requirements, using evidence gathered through visitor surveys undertaken last year; this work is key to inform the development of management and business plans for the site. A report on this will be brought back to Cabinet in due course.

4. Next steps and review

- 4.1 The Country Parks team will continue to deliver high quality operational management and maintenance of our successful Country Parks sites, balancing their benefits for local people, conservation, and income generation.
- 4.2 We will regularly monitor the leisure market to ensure that the parks remain commercially competitive and continue to sustain high levels of customer experience and satisfaction. Where internal or external funds become available, and in line with the Council's financial approvals processes, we will seek to deliver appropriate developments and improvements aligned to the agreed spatial and management plans, to ensure that each of the Country Parks retains its USP.

