

BUSINESS PLAN

Warwickshire County Council's Country Parks Service

2009 - 2014



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*Working for
Warwickshire*



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Executive Summary

Purpose and Review

This plan aims to move Warwickshire's country parks towards a cost neutral basis, i.e. where operational costs (all staff costs, day-to-day running costs and maintenance expenditure) are offset by fees and income generation.

A cost neutral Country Parks service is more likely to be protected from future cuts and the difficult decisions local authorities currently face. The premise for Country Parks, as a discretionary service, is that those who benefit from using the parks, and the services provided, contribute to their upkeep. This is a challenge as the service has already embraced commercial opportunities within parks that are 'free at the point of entry' (customers only paying to park vehicles).

Extensive customer satisfaction surveys across the sites tell us that the parks are highly valued by customers and that the sites and services are perceived to give very good value for money. The sites comprise some of the county's finest countryside and are in themselves examples of sustainability, all having had former industrial uses, that the Council has transformed into valued community assets. As we pursue this plan, it is essential that we retain this customer focus.

There are very considerable public benefits to be derived from well managed parks and green spaces, including; health and well-being benefits, education, biodiversity, tourism, business and community ventures within the parks, partnerships, volunteering and skills development, narrowing the gaps, etc.

This is a 5 year plan and each year we will review progress over the preceding 12 months and produce an action plan for the next 12 months.

The Parks Portfolio, Services and Trends

The parks portfolio is mature, with some having been managed by the Council for over 30 years. The sites are:

- Kingsbury Water Park
- Pooley Country Park (adjacent to Polesworth),
- Hartshill Hayes Country Park
- Ryton Pools Country Park
- Burton Dassett Hills Country Park
- The Stratford Greenway
- The Kenilworth Greenway
- The Offchurch Greenway
- Ufton Fields Nature Reserve
- Draycote Water (leased to Seven Trent)

The portfolio has been rationalised in recent years. This has been achieved by seeking partners to manage other land of environmental and recreational benefit and this process continues.

The trend over the last 10 years has been for a sustained rise in visitor numbers (increasing by around 50%). We have a very broad spectrum of visitors. The parks (especially Kingsbury Water Park and Ryton Pools Country Park) are very well used by elderly customers, and those with physical and mental impairments, either with family or professional carers. Similarly, the parks attract a great many Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) visitors (certainly in greater proportion to the Warwickshire population) and this presents challenges of meeting different needs of a broad spectrum of customers. Today the parks welcome over 750,000 visitors per annum. Although this rise in numbers has a positive effect on income generation, this is partly offset by increased costs. The parks service has increasingly embraced a commercial culture, generating two thirds operating costs back as income. Given that one can walk or cycle in for free, this is a considerable achievement. Many services within the parks are delivered through commercial leases and concessions with both the private sector and a range of not for profit organisations. The services delivered to the public by in-house staff include;

- Guided Walks and Events.
- Holiday Activities and 'Parties in the Park' (children's parties/room hire).
- Education Programme.
- Information and Retail.
- Room, Equipment, and Event Space hire.
- The Kingsbury Fishery (including Young Anglers)
- Outdoor Education Centre (run by Children, Young People and Families Directorate)
- Recreational cycling and walking trails.

Future Challenges and Income Generation

A major factor will be the requirement of a budget decrease and more reliance on achieving income to support the provision of the service.

Succession planning is an important consideration due to key staff nearing retirement age. Similarly constraints on recruitment along with increasing visitor numbers creates both pressures and opportunities. There are opportunities to tap into public sector apprenticeships which would enable us to 'grow our own' which should be explored. Country Parks are a front-line service, and must ensure high levels of customer service and delivery.

The plan focuses on additional income generation (reviewing existing fees and charges, rents and concessions, introducing differential pricing for car parking, and new ventures). The implications of proposed increases are examined, together with the likely impact on customers, commercial and not-for-profit partners. The plan also examines alternative means of service delivery for certain services, as well as looking at the key developments, pressure and opportunities, including maximising the use of built assets.

We are cautious about adding significantly to the infrastructure within the parks. Whilst external capital funding may be available, it is unlikely that we will be progressing projects unless satisfied that no revenue pressure results. The plan identifies a number of commercial development options for specific sites. Each of these requires a fuller assessment of potential, funding/commercial partner search and risk assessment. At present the current service does not have the capacity to drive these forward without support.

Allied to the business plan, we have produced the first Country Parks Marketing Plan and are trying some new approaches to marketing and publicity. However, the single most important factor for attracting visitors is the high weather dependency of outdoor leisure. A sunny Summer Sunday (especially one that was forecasted!) can see 1,500+ paying cars at Kingsbury. A washout will see <50.

Our intention for the future is that new concessions should be 'open to all' i.e. not restricted to club members only, unless health and safety/insurance prevents this. We will also encourage long established watersports clubs to do more public facing events, open days etc.

The fishery at Kingsbury Water Park is one of the most diverse fisheries in the Midlands. Although the surge in local (overstocked) provision has had an impact, through farmers digging out small pools, together with disease and stock loss through flooding, it continues to bring significant income (directly through ticket/permit sales and indirectly through car parking and elective spend). We intend seeking advice on the fishery and will be developing a dedicated marketing plan. There are also options for externalisation and/or sizable development of competition pools.

Consolidation of the Portfolio

In order to move forwards with our plan we must take a radically different view of the portfolio. We have identified those sites we should focus on for development and income generation and those we should scale back or look to dispose of.

First tier = Invest/Develop – Kingsbury, Pooley, Stratford Greenway.

Second tier = Static/Maintain – Ryton, Burton Dassett, Offchurch, Kenilworth, Hartshill.

Third tier = Review and Restructure – Stockton, Ufton.

Whilst existing infrastructure within the parks is generally in reasonable condition, notable exceptions are the Visitor Centre at Hartshill Hayes which is at end of life and no longer fit for purpose and the cafe building at Ryton Pools. External funding may be available, but it requires capacity to pursue this and, inevitably, an ongoing revenue commitment. In the current climate, partnership funding may be the only sustainable option to secure the future at some locations.

1. General Service Description

Mission Statement: To provide enjoyable, informative and safe visits to managed countryside for the widest possible audience, within a business unit environment.

A Brief Overview of the Business:

1.1 Origins of the Parks

Following the success of the National Parks established under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, the government recognised the need for more local access to countryside, particularly for the urban population, and enabled local authorities to set up country park facilities through the Countryside Act 1968.

Early thinking on country parks was that they were envisaged as places to take pressure off the wider countryside and were a key proposal of the 1968 Countryside Act. The criteria for a country park was:-

- Readily accessible for motor vehicles and pedestrians.
- Provided with an adequate range of facilities, including parking, toilets and a supervisory service as a minimum.

Warwickshire County Council purchased Kingsbury Water Park in 1975. Both Kingsbury Water Park in the north and Ryton Pools Country Park in the south were originally established to function as 'gateways' to the wider countryside so people could make use of connections to public rights of way and explore the wider countryside through information provided in our Visitor Centres. An added benefit at Kingsbury, was that it enabled people to participate in water sports without having to go to the coast. Over the subsequent years people have come to enjoy the sites for their own blend of facilities and services provided, often without venturing further afield.

Warwickshire's sites have all had a previous industrial use (mining, railways, quarries, etc) and considerable investment has been required to transform the land into the valued community assets we have today.

1.2 The Parks Today

Warwickshire's portfolio of country parks currently comprises 5 main park sites, 3 linear greenways, and 2 nature reserves. The total area extends to some 1,318 acres (533 hectares). We welcome over 750,000 visitors each year and are host to a number of commercial, and not-for-profit organisations which provide services to visitors in partnership with us.

In the late 1990's there was an increasing awareness that Britain's heritage of parks and open spaces was in danger of a serious decline, due to the combined pressures of antisocial behaviour, reductions in staffing, and under-investment. A series of reports highlighted the need to address this decline, notably:

- Parks, People & Cities (1996) – Dept of Environment.
- Select Committee Report on Town and Country Parks (1999).
- Delivering an Urban Renaissance (2000) – DETR.
- Public Parks Assessment (2001) – Urban Parks Forum.
- Green Spaces, Better Places (2002) – Urban Green Spaces Taskforce.
- Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener (2002) – ODPM.
- Improving Urban Parks, Play Areas and Green Spaces (2002) – DETR.

Today, public parks are a vital element in the Government's drive for 'greener, safer, cleaner' communities (Living Places, 2002) and under its 'livability' agenda, the aspiration is "for a renaissance of England's green spaces. The parks are closely aligned with many of the council's priorities, bringing benefits to the local population and visitors, in particular;

- **Raising Educational Attainment and Improving the Lives of Children, Young People and Families** through our education programmes delivered at the Education Centres in the parks education for sustainable development, environmental education and outdoor education.
- **Maximising Independence for Older People and People with Disabilities** by providing highly accessible countryside sites with high quality paths, mobility scooter hire, chaperoned visits, participative inclusive events, sheltered placements, volunteering and structured skills development.
- **Developing Sustainable Places and Communities** through the transformation of former industrial sites into high quality community assets that raise the quality of life. Promoting sustainability through highly visible demonstration projects. Ensuring a vibrant visitor economy through direct and indirect employment in the parks and by acting as a gateway to local countryside attractions and the wider Warwickshire countryside.
- The service contributes to '**narrowing the gaps**' corporate priority. To reduce differences across the county in terms of achievement, opportunity and quality of life. The focus is not just geographic, but also communities of interest, working to improve the quality of life of all across Warwickshire, but more quickly for those most disadvantaged in our more disadvantaged communities.

- The service has, and continues to seek, effective **partnerships with private sector business**. Many of them complementing the Council's corporate objectives e.g. Sailing Clubs involvement with youth and teaching sailing to qualification level.

By doing this we contribute towards making Warwickshire the best place to live, work and visit.

Public Benefits – Health and well-being, informal sports and physical activity, access to nature, water and woodland, personal challenges, community participation

Parks and green spaces contribute positively to our quality of life. The links between parks and the benefits to health and well-being are well researched and documented. There are also links to the obesity concerns in the present generation of children. In particular, children can become more active through informal sport, structured activities and clubs and challenge themselves through adventure play.

1.3 The Market

There are a great many ways to segment our market and this is looked at in more detail in the marketing section of this plan and the appended Country Parks Marketing Plan. In general they are:-

- Local residents within easy reach of the facilities.
- Families with young children.
- School children.
- Ethnic and Disabled Groups.
- Special interests (anglers, modellers, water sports, birders, club members, etc).
- Over 50's visitors.

Our industry is positioned within the outdoor leisure market. Typically this market can be subject to pressures such as weather dependency and the state of the economy. However, we would expect that the parks may do well from the current recession by offering good value for money, and a suitable alternative to the 'big day out' or trip to the seaside.

2. Vision for the Future

The way forward for Warwickshire County Council Country Parks Service is to develop strategies for continued growth, make savings, identify the core business, and to maximise profit to move toward operation as a zero cost business unit within 3 years. However, our service must remain customer focused and take into account the needs of our customers in order to achieve this. The Country Parks Service is required to identify potential cost savings, in order to meet the County Council savings targets. The parks also need to continue to adapt to fit the needs of society and offer opportunities and benefits for people of all ages and abilities in a climate where political agendas and people's expectations are constantly evolving.

Our Vision for the Portfolio is: vibrant and valued, customer focused parks and green spaces that run at no, or low, cost to the public purse.

We must also be realistic about what is achievable within available revenue resources, and therefore must set out our objectives.

Objectives:

- Provide a positive customer experience of the countryside.
- Develop skills of young people through training and volunteering opportunities.
- Increase the number of tourists/visitors to country parks.
- Seek investment in the service through partnerships and grant funding opportunities but be mindful that any new ventures do not give rise to revenue pressures.
- Continue to improve facilities and site access in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).
- To strive towards getting Country Parks Accreditation (Natural England).
- Provide environmental facilities that Warwickshire County Council (WCC) are best placed to facilitate at low cost.

2.1 Products and Services

Products: 5 main park sites, 3 linear greenways, 2 nature reserves and other land leased to third parties

Site	Type/visitor offer and services	Acres/ (Ha)	Facilities and Leases Commercial Lease Partner Lease	Notes
Kingsbury Water Park (tier 1)	Country Park Lakes, Woods, Trails, Events, Fishery (specimen, permits and day tickets)	624 (253)	3 Toilet Blocks Information Centre Children's Farm Environmental Education Centre Outdoor Education Centre 2 Cafes Camping & Caravan Site Jet Bike Centre Sailing club } Power Boat club } Cycle Hire RSPB Bird Club/hides Miniature Railway Model Boat Club 2 Adventure Play Areas Grazing Tenant Ice Cream Concession Orienteering Course Free Mobility Scooter Hire	New for 2009/10: Investment and marketing needed in order to promote fishing Donkey ride concession Bouncy play concession Problems with flooding cause continued erosion issues Very popular with customers returning on weekly basis

Burton Dassett Hills Country Park (tier 2)	Country Park Sheep grazed hills, viewpoint, events	102 (41)	Toilet block (no electric) Grazing Tenant Ice Cream Concession	New leases with model glider club and kite soaring club. Ditch and mound works to control illegal vehicular use started April 2009
Ryton Pools Country Park (tier 2)	Country park Access to 100 acres of adjacent ancient woodland Pools, trails, play, events. 'Martha' energy from methane exhibition.	100 (41)	Toilets Café Information Centre Education Centre 2 Play Areas Miniature Railway Energy from methane exhibition Bird Hides Angling Club Grazing Tenant Orienteering Course Mobility Scooter Hire Sensory Garden/Trail	Site includes access to 100+ acres of Ryton Wood (managed by Wildlife Trust) No more uncapped land available for developments (e.g. car parking). Outdated young play area needs modernising
Pooley Country Park (tier 1)	Country park Trails, viewpoint, nature reserve with pools and woodland. Wind turbine and sustainability demonstration.	154 (63)	Toilets Centre (information, education room, tea room, mining heritage collection) Play area Grazing Tenant Orienteering Course Mobility scooter hire	New for 2009/10 Fishing Permits. Concession at Pooley Wharf for Self Drive Hire Boats. Arts regeneration project with Homes and Communities Agency Seeking 'High ropes' concession and/or adventure play Site now incorporates Alvecote Priory (former picnic area).

Hartshill Hayes Country Park (tier 2)	Country park Woodland, meadow with viewpoint, trails, and events	137 (56)	Toilets Information centre Play area Orienteering course	Paths and trails in need of refurbishment Information centre and toilet block is at end of life Looking for Catering Concession
Draycote Water (tier 3)	Picnic site Land adjacent Seven Trent Water (STW) reservoir, with view point, meadows	22 (9)	Toilet block	Site leased to STW for 30 yrs from April 2004.
The Offchurch Greenway (tier 2)	Greenway Walking, cycling	21 (9)	None	Bridge over Fosse Way required to create longest traffic free cycle route (continuation of track bed to Rugby owned by Sustrans)
The Stratford Greenway (tier 1)	Greenway Walking, Cycling + permissive bridleway, events	35 (14)	2 Cafes + Cycle Hire in old railway carriages	2nd carriage and cycle hire at Seven meadows new for 2009.
The Kenilworth Greenway (tier 2)	Greenway		None	Being opened as part of Sustrans National Lottery funded Connect2 scheme
Ufton Fields Nature Reserve (tier 3)	Nature reserve Pools, walks, nature watching	77 (31)	Bird Hide Fishing	Leased to WWT, negotiating land transfer.
Stockton Cutting (tier 3)	Nature reserve Nature watching		None	Negotiations to transfer to WWT

2.2 Competitive Opportunities and Threats

Strengths and Opportunities	Threats and Weaknesses
Venues for great value family days out.	Poor public transport links
Close to significant population centres and population predicted to expand.	Opening hours could be limiting for some
Special interest groups and venues for people to host their own events	Low entertainment value – unless on organised walk or event, customers are largely expected to make their own entertainment
Access to water and woods (market research consistently tells us that, in the absence of mountain and coast, people want access to water and woodland).	Highly weather dependant – limited indoor space if raining
Country parks are free at the point of use, i.e. customers only pay to park vehicles.	Reduces income potential

2.3 Pricing

Originally, country parks were little more than green spaces where visitors could enjoy some fresh air in natural surroundings. Increasingly, sites like Kingsbury Water Park have developed to include facilities and activities for customers to participate in, or simply enjoy as a spectacle.

Traditionally parks services have offered small scale events programmes, walks and talks, etc. at low cost.

More recently, prices have been increased above Retail Price Index (RPI) to reflect the investment and added value to the public amenity.

Examples of current daily parking charges are; £3.00 Kingsbury, £2.00 Ryton, £1.50 Pooley and Hartshill.

Full price list is at Appendix I.

Prices are kept competitive within the local green sector. Some parks services continue to offer free parking, but these are now the exception. Good value annual and half-year parking permits are sold (50% discount to Disabled Badge holders).

3. Marketing Plan

The first marketing plan for Country Parks has been produced in 2009, which is attached as Appendix II.

3.1 Primary Research

We are confident about the quality of feedback from customers, including special interests. However, whilst survey work with existing customers is easy to do, surveying those who don't visit is less easy to achieve. We have undertaken occasional resident surveys, but these are expensive and hence tend to be carried out only when external funding is available.

The key feedback mechanisms in current use are:-

- Annual visitor survey questionnaire (paper and on-line) - includes 10 standard questions established by the West Midlands Countryside Benchmarking Group.
- Citizens Panel questionnaires.
- Yellow 'Comments Cards' are available for visitors at all sites.
- Website/email feedback.
- User and Focus groups (e.g. associated with development of management plans, dogs policy).
- Face to face staff contact (rangers and reception staff) and indirectly through concessions, particularly in the cafes.
- Feedback forms for education groups and events.
- Corporate comments, compliments, complaints.

We use all of the above in developing the sites and services in line with customer expectation, and to inform marketing, including the setting of fees and charges.

3.2 Secondary Research

Published information such as industry profiles, trade journals and magazines (Leisure Attractions Magazine), newspapers, Internet and industry networks and bodies e.g. Countryside Network, Centre for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), Countryside Management Association (CMA), Natural England, etc, census data, and demographic profiles provided by The Warwickshire Observatory.

3.3 Future Marketing Priorities

Developing the unique offer at each site and an identity for each park.

Marketing north and south sites to their respective catchments.

Off peak marketing for the main sites.

Events 2010, European miniature railways event and grand opening, joint water sports open day.

Marketing and audience development for the Pooley arts project.

Shopping Centre - week long event at Ropewalk advertising the Country Parks.

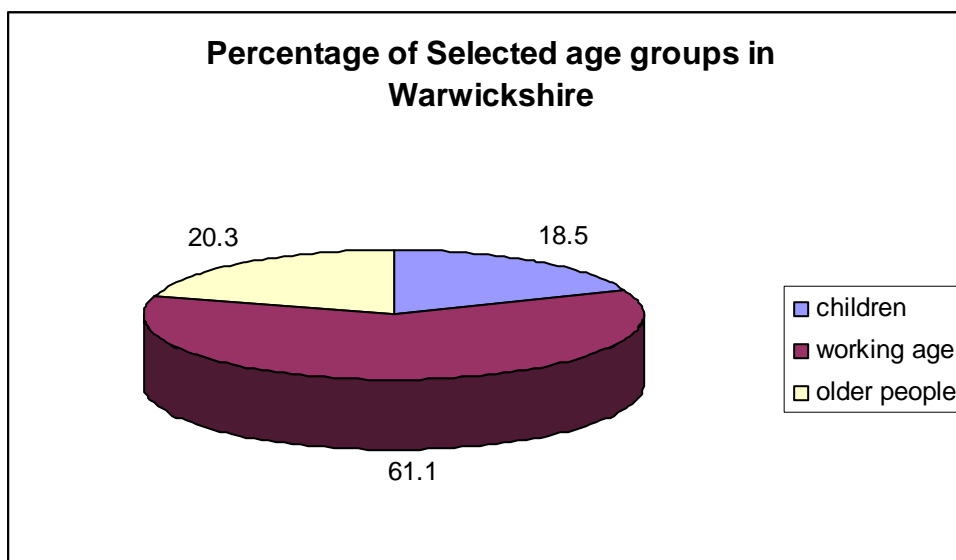
Linking up with the Muckin4Life campaign we are looking to engage families, including grandparents and children age 6-11, in conservation volunteering. Defra's Press Office will also generate coverage in national media.

4. Demographics and Economics

The population of Warwickshire is projected to reach a total of 637,400 by 2031 – an increase of 115,200 people or 22.1% on the 2006 mid year estimate. This increase over the 25 year period is higher than the projected regional and national population growth rates of 13.9% and 19.0% respectively.

Within Warwickshire, the south of the County is expected to experience the highest rates of population growth. Growth will continue to be most rapid in Warwick District with an overall increase of 31.6% between 2006 and 2031, bringing the total population in the district to 174,900.

Figure 1: Percentage of selected age groups in Warwickshire



Across Warwickshire as a whole, the highest rates of projected population growth are in the groups aged 65 and over. The rate of growth increases with age, with the oldest age group (those aged 85 and over) projected to increase by over 160% by 2031. This trend is reflected across all the districts and boroughs. (Source: Quality of Life Report 2008)

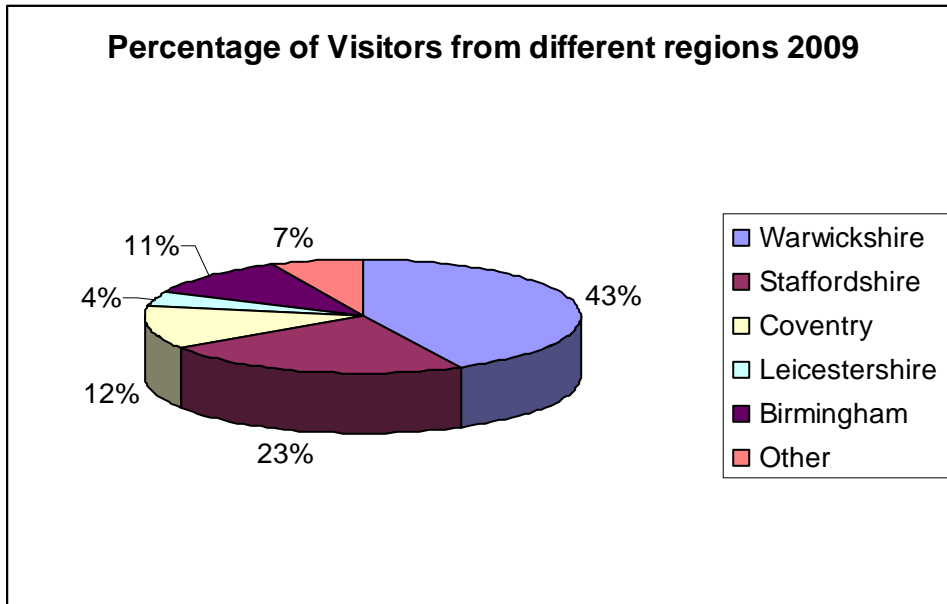
There are 249 maintained schools in Warwickshire with 75,901 pupils (Source: Spring School Census Jan 2009 (provisional)).

The last 10 years has seen demand for high spend leisure in a cash rich/time poor economic boom. Recent down turn is seeing market trend for more local value for money leisure. Less holidays and less foreign travel are a factor. Conversely, children are no longer 'free range' and almost always come as part of a family group or other adult led party. The results from the changes in population could mean that the parks benefit from increased visits from the over 65's so we need to ensure we are gearing up to meet their needs in the future.

4.1 Number of Visits to Warwickshire's Country Parks

The table below indicates a significant rise in numbers visiting the parks. Figures are derived from car park permits and day tickets (the methodology and assumptions have remained unchanged throughout the period). Visitor numbers for the first quarter of 2009/10 support the contention that the economic down turn is not having an adverse effect on our service.

YEAR	ALL PARKS (Including Kingsbury Water Park)	KINGSBURY WATER PARK
2008/9	690,060	339,546
2007/08	729,041	356,143
2006/07	700,887	355,087
2005/06	639,525 (Problem with Ryton's barrier and Burton Dassett's Pay & Display)	333,163
2004/05	647,166 (Draycote leased to ST and no longer included - 87,000 in 03/04)	328,396
2003/04	713,834 (Pooley included)	311,970
2002/03	652,017	297,830
2001/02	533,984 (Black Fly problem at Kingsbury)	253,349*
2000/01	554,265 (Foot & Mouth Disease Crisis)	261,876*
1999/2000	593,110	280,111
1998/99	547,233	255,313
1997/98	537,130	264,068



The chart above shows the percentage of visitors and where they are coming from to visit the Country Parks. This information was recorded from our 2009 Visitor Survey. It can be seen that the majority of our visitors to all the parks live within the Warwickshire region. (More information on our visitors can be obtained from the Visitor Survey 2009).

In addition, under planning proposals already approved by a planning inspector and awaiting ministerial sanction, there will be an urban corridor stretching from Nuneaton down to Warwick, with significant growth in and around Coventry. This may well provide future opportunities for the parks service.

There are as yet, no commercial operators of country parks, although there are other Councils or Trusts locally offering similar services at broadly similar costs to the customer. Competition is perhaps more relevant from other sectors of the leisure market competing for customers time (garden centres and countryside retail e.g. Hatton, Evesham diversified garden centres, craft villages, theme parks, sport, etc.).

We believe we have a strong recognisable brand for the parks, and one that benefits from being hosted within the trusted WCC brand. Having remained static for a number of years, we have recently begun to develop the branding (e.g. new parks entrance signs) and strap lines through planned campaigns (e.g. 'breath of fresh air' for Spring 2009).

4.2 Economic Threats to the Service

The current economic downturn does not appear to be negatively affecting parks and indeed good value low cost attractions appear to be faring better than more expensive options.

Lack of public transport to sites may have a negative effect if the economic downturn is severe and prolonged.

Increasing burden of Health and Safety could limit the use of volunteers and reduce visits by schools/groups. This burden is also felt by our small not for profit partners and community enterprises.

Changing economy, i.e. West Midlands, has been hit heavily by recent recession resulting in many job losses in the area.

The need to be even more commercial is likely to be at the expense of other agendas (social inclusion, health and well-being, etc.).

The growth of leisure destinations in the countryside may have provided competition, but equally, more brown tourist sign destinations in a catchment can feed off one another. This certainly seems to be the case in North Warwickshire.

The main economic threats are therefore travel costs associated with getting to the sites and, in the event of significant rises in our fees and charges, reduced footfall and income as customers seek alternative local provision.

4.3 Features and Benefits of the Service

Our product is a well managed green space that comprises some of Warwickshire's finest and most diverse countryside. The product is enhanced by visitor facilities, paths and trails, signage and interpretation and visitor services.

4.4 Customers

Our customers comprise all ages and we generally cater from cradle to grave. Some customers visiting as children, later return with their own young families, or as grandparents or as empty nesters.

Income level - the typical gross annual earnings for a full-time worker living in Warwickshire (before tax, national insurance or other deductions) were £25,100 in 2006. This is £1,300 higher than the equivalent figure for England and Wales (£23,800) and £2,700 more than the typical earnings of West Midlands' residents (£22,400) (WCC Quality of Life Report 2007).

Social class/occupation skewed towards Mosaic Group C – older families living in suburbia

Skills levels held by the resident population vary significantly within Warwickshire. Warwick has the second highest proportion of its population qualified to NVQ4 or above in the West Midlands Region. However, Nuneaton and Bedworth has one of the lowest proportions qualified to NVQ4 or above in the Region (Quality of Life Report 2007).

Ethnicity – the most recent population estimates by Ethnic Group suggest that non 'White British' groups make up approximately 9.2% of Warwickshire's total population, an increase from 7.3% in 2001. In number terms, the 'Asian Indian' and 'Other White' ethnic groups are the largest non 'White British' groups in the County. At district level, Warwick District is estimated to have the highest proportion of non 'White British' residents, at 14.0%, and North Warwickshire has the lowest proportion, at 5.1%.

Indians are the largest non 'White British' ethnic group in four of Warwickshire's five districts. The exception being Stratford-upon-Avon, where the 'Other White' ethnic group is the largest (WCC Quality of Life Report 2008).

4.5 Competition

There are 45 sites calling themselves Country Parks in the West Midlands. How we differentiate or make ourselves distinctive from these is important. In the table below the local attractions nearby are identified as potential competitors. Although they may not actually offer anything similar to our service, they still compete for the visitor pound. Significant competitors are listed below.

Park	Competitor	Detail
Kingsbury Water Park	Drayton Manor	Theme park and zoo
	Middleton Hall	RSPB reserve, walks, lakes (Visitor Centre(VC) planned)
	Local fisheries	Fishing
	Shustoke Reservoir	Sailing, fishing, trails, etc.
	Planters Garden Centre & Whitacre Garden Centre	Garden centre with cafe
Hartshill Hayes Country Park	Dobbies Garden Centre	Garden centre with cafe and pay and play outdoor activities
Pooley Country Park	Planters Garden Centre	Garden centre
Ryton Pools Country Park	Ryton Organic Gardens	Garden centre, VC, education, conferences
	Brandon Marsh	WWT HQ. VC and Nature Reserve, education, events
	Coombe Abbey	Country park, VC, fishing, education, events
	Draycote Water (although owned by WCC it is leased to Seven Trent)	Reservoir/sailing, fishing VC, education and events

4.6 Niche

The country parks niche is the provision of local, well managed, and safe countryside offering something for everyone. It is less formal than a town park or garden, but offers more facilities than a nature reserve and provides outdoor countryside recreation for all at minimal cost. Within this broad description, sites vary enormously (both locally, and across the UK).

4.7 Strategy

Our marketing strategy needs to focus on two main areas:-

1. How to Keep Customers

This is vital as it is impossible to continually break into new markets. Good value permits and service development in line with customer expectation are essential. Establish a country park 'brand' which customers become loyal towards.

2. How to Attract New Customers

This is a challenge within a low cost leisure market and commensurate scale of marketing budget. Market research shows disappointingly low customer awareness of the sites within the anticipated catchment. The marketing plan seeks to redress this, including forging greater links with the local tourism market.

4.8 Promotion

We promote ourselves through the Warwickshire County Council website, through other internet sites, through leaflets and booklets distributed to Tourist Information Centres (TICs), libraries, schools and local publicly accessible places. Through selling maps and leaflets in the Visitor Centres, by putting on events during school holidays. Through regular (at least monthly) press releases and adverts in occasional glossy magazines which are local to the area e.g. Warwickshire Life and Insight Magazine. We obtain feedback from events which asks where people have found out about the event.

Also we use word of mouth, and networks of friends and professionals to inform people of our services.

We need to make more use of data we have on our customers by carrying out targeted mail-outs e.g. to permit holders, to fishing permit holders, to schools etc. forge links to district councils and tourism.

4.9 Promotional Budget

The marketing budget has reduced in real terms over the last 5 years. We are producing less in printed format, in favour of the internet. The current budget of just under £20k (with a resultant visitor income of £400k+).

We have been trying new things this year as actions from the marketing plan. Film footage for plasma screens in parks, council venues, one stop shops/web, new booklet design, Spring campaign.

We also use “freebies” to give away to children coming on school visits in order to generate repeat visits with family groups.

4.10 Pricing

Our current pricing strategy is to try to remain within our competitors price range and what tends to be the average across the industry. We received feedback that generally visitors are satisfied that the parks (although not always our commercial concessions e.g. pricing and opening hours) are providing very good value for money. Competitive pricing is important, especially for the education provision as often the cost of the coach on top of the cost per child can be prohibitive to a visit.

4.11 Location

The physical location of the sites arises from their former industrial use as quarries, landfill, railways and mines. However, their location is questionable when looking at issues around public transport, as many of the sites are not accessible by regular public transport. This will affect potential customers who do not have access to a car and live further away than a walk or cycle ride. This could be seen to be inconsistent with our image of trying to get the public active and healthy and to promote sustainability. However, the car parking element remains our main income generator.

5. Sales Forecast

In an outdoor leisure industry, sales/income forecasting is notoriously difficult. We have a wealth of comparative and trend data going back 15 years that demonstrates this. Factors such as when Easter falls, weather on key weekends and Bank Holidays are the main factors.

The income chart at Appendix III illustrates the dramatic swings experienced from month to month. However, experience tells us that by the end period 6 we have received 65% - 70% of total income for the year. The end of September Budget Report is therefore used to review expenditure and income against targets and the Winter repairs and developments programme is tempered accordingly. By this straightforward expedient, Country Parks have a good record of bringing the service in on budget (albeit that a disastrous or exceptional March can not be planned for).

A number of factors may change this year on year forecasting. In particular an anticipated change to rolling monthly permit sales (rather than yearly from April) will skew this.

5.1 Minimum Standards and Potential Performance Indicators

These are required so that we have something to measure the service against. The service currently only formally reports on ‘levels of customer satisfaction’, although other data is collected to track trends and benchmark through the Midlands Countryside Benchmarking Group.

Increasing visitor numbers, and therefore revenue, remains a top priority along with customer satisfaction. However, it may be worth adopting some indicators as identified by Natural England (Recommendations for a Renaissance of Country Parks).

Minimum Standard	Performance Indicator
Management plan (including marketing and interpretation)	To have plans for all Country Park sites and produce an annual update, 5-year review
Business plan	Produce and review each year
Training plan	Implementation and monitoring from appraisals yearly
Regular visitor surveys including non-users	% satisfaction every 3 years, number of repeat visits
Toilets	Visitor provision – English Tourist Board standards
Good signage (external directions, internal orientation) circular routes, footpaths, cycleways	Minimum number of complaints
Disability access	BT Countryside For All/Fieldfare Trust standards where possible/reasonable
Public transport routes linked to non-motorised user network	Local Transport Plan
User forums/friends groups	Once/twice yearly meetings
Volunteer opportunities and Positive community engagement	No. of volunteer days per year
Customer care/attention to detail	Minimum complaints, positive yellow cards. WCC Standards achieved, mystery shopping – Visitor Attraction
Accessibility, getting there and getting around	Car parking provision, success of public transport links, customer complaints, path and wider access network links
Quality of experience	Customer feedback
Quantity – hectarage, etc.	Appropriate landscape management Higher Level Stewardship, Tame Valley Project.
Education	number of visits, % good/very good
Retail performance	% increase of sales year on year
Income generation	How much income?

6. Future Service Direction and Maximising Income

Marketing: Develop the theme or brand for each individual site, and expand the customer offer (Marketing Plan at Appendix II).

Consolidation: Maximise income from visitors, concessions and land within the portfolio without deterring patronage.

Development: Explore commercial opportunities that do not have revenue implications and seek grant funding to improve infrastructure, or add new elements.

Rationalisation:

First Tier = Invest/Develop – Kingsbury, Pooley, Stratford Greenway
Second Tier = Static/Maintain – Ryton, Burton Dassett, Offchurch, Kenilworth
Third Tier = Review and Restructure – Hartshill, Stockton and Ufton

6.1 Core Business

The main income streams within the parks are:-

Car parking	£ 270k (daily tickets and permits)
Rents and concessions	£ 135k (see paragraph 2.1)
Retail sales	£ 65k (gross)
Education/events	£ 40k (excludes shop sales, parking, etc)
Fishing	£ 26k (excludes parking)
Other	£ 30k (memorials, etc)

These are examined below.

6.2 Opportunities for Maximising Income

Car Parking (current prices at Appendix I)

This is the largest revenue source for the service. Good value permits (based upon multiplier of 12 x daily charge) are available for each park. An 'All Parks' pass is also sold, but in modest numbers. Offering good value permits is a reasonable defence against above Retail Price Index (RPI) increases in day tickets, particularly for regulars and local residents.

Day Tickets

There is scope to increase charges. The spreadsheet at Appendix IV shows the effect on income when a drop in visitor numbers is also factored in (the elasticity of demand). The parks parking charges are modest compared to town centres and NHS, but are comparable with the countryside sector for our local catchment.

In the current economic climate there has been an increase in our visitors. It is envisaged that this is because we offer a low cost value day out and an alternative to the more expensive days out such as Drayton Manor. However, consideration needs to be given to the fact that it is only weekends and Bank Holidays which see the full range of activities available within the sites and some of these cannot operate during wet weather. This, together with high peak demand, leads us to consider differential pricing for weekends and Bank Holidays (at least for the Summer season). A number of differential pricing scenarios are included at Appendix IV with a variety of high and low season and weekend versus weekday pricing, including some discounting for low season weekdays. These examples have used the Kingsbury main entrance and the current £3 fee as a base line, and the average number of paying cars over the last 3 years to make income projections. The examples then assume different levels of decrease in paying cars as a result of the rise (some visitors being deterred from visiting, others parking off-site and walking in, others choosing to purchase good value permits).

Permits

Currently permits can only be sold for a full year from April or half year late season from September due to the existing barrier systems and supporting software. Disabled/ Blue badge holders are offered permits at 50% discount. No discount exists on day tickets. Discounts will be reduced to 20% in 2010 as a reflection of the improved facilities/services available.

The entrance/pay barrier systems are antiquated and the back office support systems are also at end of life. Whilst new systems will be costly, there are opportunities to procure more flexible systems that allow for rolling renewal of permits/differential pricing, enhanced security, etc. New parking systems have been examined in detail and benchmarked with other providers and are the subject of a separate detailed report compiled by Paul Perkins in Information Technology (available but not appended) . We will be:-

- Procuring new entrance barriers and support systems for prioritised roll out (Appendix V), including more stringent parking enforcement at Hartshill Hayes and Burton Dassett to resolve non-payer issues. Alongside such measures, self-closing gates/toilets would also negate the need to have Rangers lock and unlock, freeing them to be on site in the core visitor hours, again facilitating parking enforcement. This will be explored in 2010 as a full project with Graham Greenwood from Civil Parking Enforcement using his expertise in this area.
- Proposing above Retail Price Index (RPI) price rises for 2011 -12.
- Consider moving to differential prices for weekends/holidays as soon as the systems are in place to enable this (Kingsbury and Ryton initially).
- Offering rolling permit renewals as soon as possible.
- Offering North (£45) and South (£30) sites permits (market research tells us that visitors from Stratford and Warwick districts do not use sites in the North, and vice versa).
- Reviewing the multiplier (currently 12 x daily ticket price) used for permit pricing.

- Reducing the 50% concession for Blue Badge holders to 20% in 2010 (the main parks are excellent for those with disabilities).
- Introduction of parking charges at Stratford Greenway depending on outcome of 'Eco town', discussions with district council. (Note: vociferous local opposition anticipated).
- Robust new enforcement of pay and display parking and recouping payments from non payers.
- Promoting the sales of permits to mitigate against customers aggrieved at price rises.

Rents and Concessions

This has been a growth area for income in recent years. We have 3 successful profit sharing arrangements with leaseholders, a number of new concessions for 2009/10, and have uplifted rents for established businesses/clubs. Whilst we predict that the economic downturn is unlikely to adversely affect the parks, commercial partners may struggle. Small set backs that would ordinarily be ridden out may prove calamitous when allied to say a dip in membership and fees. We will continue to hold regular meetings with tenants and work in partnership to ensure continuity (of both service and rental income).

The main growth areas within rents and concession income is therefore likely to be in establishing new ventures within the parks.

Development options currently being investigated, include;

- High Ropes course at Pooley (in connection with the Arts regeneration project).
- Potential for row boats concession at Kingsbury on one of the lakes.
- Potential profit sharing arrangements with tenants/concessions upon renewal or new lease arrangements.
- Café or catering concession at Hartshill Hayes in current visitor centre over summer 2009 – however, early indications show this has not been successful, in part due to the poor state of the building. Mobile catering now being considered.
- Of the existing arrangements, the award winning Camping and Caravan Club Site at Kingsbury Water Park may benefit from the recent upsurge in camping and less foreign travel. The miniature railway is due to open a further section of track and a new station for Spring 2010, enabling visitors to use the railway as a means of getting around the site rather than just a pleasure ride. Both of these ventures have profit sharing elements within the lease and these are already paying dividends.
- 4 new concessions taken on in 2008/9 at Kingsbury and Hartshill. Potential for further concessions at Kingsbury by exploring/retail and/or craft workshops.
- Continue to review rents on a more commercial basis as they come up for renewal and to create new opportunities.

- Examine retail opportunities at Kingsbury from relocating the office space to free up a potential retail location within the park.

Retail Sales

Although retail is not the primary function of the Information Centres, more and more space has been given over to retail to ensure income targets are met. We have been reviewing stocking levels and want to introduce more local and sustainable products, including by-products from our Forestry Operations. It is also essential that we rotate stock regularly and give visitors other reasons for coming back into the centres (bird box/bat/microscope cameras linked to plasma screens, etc.) We are also revamping Kingsbury for Spring 2010 and plan to revamp Ryton for 2011. A small plantation of Christmas Trees has been planted for sale through the centre and by direct marketing to customers and WCC staff. Woodland products from the Forestry Service are now being sold in addition to locally produced wood products.

Education and Events Programmes

Note: The education/events offer at the Outdoor Education Centre operated by Children Young People and Families (CYP&F) and the Children's farm that operates under a commercial lease at Kingsbury Water Park are outside the scope of this plan.

In common with almost all other country parks services, wildlife trusts, water authority reservoirs, etc. an education and events programme is offered. The Environmental Education programme is primarily aimed at Key Stages 1 and 2. This outdoor education provides another dimension to school education programmes.

Research has shown that contact with nature can have a positive effect, especially for children who do not do well in a classroom environment. The parks service offers a 'learning outside the classroom' element, with the added benefit of generating repeat visits, and spending in the shop.

The authority has benefited from significant capital investment in the form of external grant support to provide the Environmental Education Centres at Kingsbury and Ryton. Although regarded as a loss leading activity, it is very much part of the core business of country parks and in tune with the manifesto for Education Outside the Classroom. Pre-booked school groups also bring the parks to life during mid-week term time and are part of our off-peak marketing of the sites.

Notwithstanding the above, we are currently exploring other means of service delivery through a partnership or lease with the local wildlife trust and/or operation of education by CYP & F.

We will be increasing the price of some events in 2010, namely general walks, young anglers, night fishing, and specialist events such as bat nights, bird box making etc.

The Fishery at Kingsbury

There are significant constraints and market forces that influence our decisions in managing the fishery, the main ones being;

- Flooding from the River Tame, (stock loss/migration between lakes).
- Disease (as above).
- Lack of site security (theft of stocks/night fishing, etc).
- Conflicting uses (water sports, busy with walkers/cyclists, etc).
- The exponential growth of farmers digging out small (overstocked) pools.

There are however opportunities for the fishery, as evidenced by the modest investment in Causeway Pool, paying dividends. We should explore:-

- Funding and disabled peg development via newly established Trust – Angling Development Board with a grant of £8,000.
- Explore external management option – to run the fishery as a separate business.
- Develop fishery marketing plan.

Other Income (memorials, etc.)

In conjunction with the development of this plan, a more structured approach to memorials has been developed, along with the creation of a memorial woodland at Kingsbury with further woods planned for Ryton and Hartshill.

A 'gifts and legacies' mail-out was included with permit renewal reminders. We hope this may pay dividends in the medium/long term akin to the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts.

Early indications show that since its roll out in September 2009, we have already sold many trees and are already receiving new income from this idea. Prices start from £75 for a whip, to £250 for a container grown standard. Currently this has resulted in £6930 of additional income so far.

We will be increasing our pitch charges for the events field at Kingsbury which will be priced for an area beyond the pole gate for exclusive use. In addition useage of our country parks and greenways for events will now have a charge as from 2010. These will be:-

Up to 50 participants	Free
50 – 100 participants	£50
101 – 200	£100
201 – 300	£150
301 – 400	£200
401 – 500	£250
500+ by agreement only (price to be agreed)	

Development Opportunities

A summary of the current service and site developments are included at Appendix V. In addition, there are other opportunities that would require greater levels of capital investment and/or significant grant funding. The final column states the actions/outcomes which will be updated once these items have been investigated. However, significant development opportunities should only be pursued within the context of a Master Plan for the site in question.

Site	Development Potential	Investment level (WCC)	Returns	Risk	Priority	Actions/Outcome
KWP	Caravan storage (C&C Club)	Low	Modest	Low	High	Currently no suitable area to store
	Conference centre (and hotel? + new VC?)	Medium	Medium/low (commercial partner taking all financial risks)	High	Low (Current downturn)	
	Civil Ceremonies	Low	Modest	Medium	High	Investigated with register office. Outdoor arrangements not suitable as need separate building with 2 rooms nearby. Not viable.
	New café/pub/restaurant	Medium	Modest	High	Low	
	Holiday accommodation Floating Chalets? Dutch Barges? Wooden Lodges?	Very High	High	Medium/High	Medium	
	Wig-wam holiday accommodation possible collaboration with camping/caravan club	Medium	Medium	Medium/Low	Low	
	Retail outlet/crafts (moving the office)	Low/medium	Low medium	Low	High	
	Fishery. Swann Pool development	Low (assumes landfill funds works)	Low/medium	Low	High	

Site	Development Potential	Investment level (WCC)	Returns	Risk	Priority	Actions/Outcome
Pooley (additional to Arts project)	Demo Eco home + expanded sustainability offer	High/Medium	Low (direct – but expands visitor offer)	Medium	Medium	
	Craft Village (buy out of industrial units – removing need to move entrance)	High/Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	
	Develop & expand Pooley wharf (extended canal moorings, crafts, etc. Convert existing centre to shop/café)	Medium High	Medium	Medium	Medium	
Ryton	Possibility of use of 'Martha' building when it is decommissioned	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	
	Woodfuel/biomass	Medium/Low	Low	Low (assumes woodfuel price tracks gas prices)	High	Ryton already selling logs – expand offer across other parks
	Environmental Stewardship Funding	Medium	High	Low	High	Important source of funding for work which in most cases is already taking place across the parks

Health and Wellbeing

Health/well-being - The Department of Health want two million more people active by 2012 (CABE). Country Parks have the ability to assist in achieving social agenda objectives and targets laid down by Government. The Department of Health has now launched pilots in London where GPs will be referring patients through a physical activity care pathway. They give out these leaflets, which don't just recommend the indoor activities; they show where the parks are and where to walk to get to those parks, and they have maps that show the GP practice right in the middle. If this scheme is launched nationally, then we are ideally placed to get involved. A study on 'the Importance of Nature for Health' by the University of Essex suggests that if 1 million people became more active and healthy the economic savings over 40 years would save £100 billion.

Informal Recreation/Sport

There are opportunities for this across all our parks, although Kingsbury is the only site with two formal football pitches which are being returned to meadow through lack of use. Organised marathons, half marathons, cycle rides and fun runs operate on the sites and more significantly there is scope for increasing informal sport across all sites.

Volunteering

The service currently benefits from small but dedicated bands of volunteers at the main sites, equating to the input of several members of staff. However this is an area where we want to expand, developing a more structured approach to volunteering, including training, reward and recognition, etc.

Opportunities to get involved, meet other people, improve health, well-being and mental health, learn new skills a potential growth area, due to the economic downturn with people considering alternative employment, improving their skills, learning new ones and networking through volunteering opportunities provided. A strong and vibrant force of volunteers can offload the burden of work on paid staff, but this needs to be well managed and deliver results and provide benefits to all involved.

Expand on the volunteer element within Country Parks explore the possibility of development of partnership similar to the Worcester Wardens Partnership with potential partners such as British Waterways, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and Natural England in order to increase opportunities, raise profile, establish sense of ownership.

Offer 'taster sessions', continue to work with volunteer centres, target leaflets in specific places such as schools/universities, doctors surgeries, job centres. Link up with Defra's 'Muck in 4Life' campaign.

Local Community Links - and friendship bonding, and a common sense of well-being. Park volunteers and sports facilitate teambuilding, socialisation, friendships, community connectedness and civic pride. To try to establish focus groups or 'friends of groups' for all the parks where appropriate, to assist with the development of the parks, generation of ideas, involvement in consultations and management plans and to seek additional funding.

Sustainability – The parks continue to contribute to renewable energy e.g. recently installed Biomass boiler at Kingsbury supplying all the heating to buildings.

Martha at Ryton Pools, Wind Turbine at Pooley generating electricity and supplying it back to the national grid.

Biodiversity - Following restoration and active management Country Parks form some of Warwickshire's finest wildlife sites with important semi-natural woodland, wetland and grassland. A few Country Parks contain nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), of which some are managed in partnership with the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

Kingsbury Water Park forms part of the Tame Valley chain of wetlands, consisting of 30 lakes, including fishing lakes and pools set in 620 acres of landscaped countryside. With lakes, streams, woodland, marshes and meadows, as well as a remarkable variety of wildlife. Partnership working with the Environment Agency has resulted in

the creation of reed beds. This contributes to part of a European Directive on increasing wetland habitats. Otters are regular visitors and otter 'holts' are being built with help of volunteers, to encourage them to become residents. The park is a part of the Tame Valley providing important linkages within the Landscape for Living initiative and the Tame Valley partnership. Ultimately we aim to benefit if the partnership is successful with its £2 million Heritage Lottery Fund bid.

Heritage/Interpretation

Most sites are former industrial heritage and this can be interpreted as living history for children and adults alike. Events/festivals – put on different events e.g. Shakespeare in the park or similar for summer evenings. Expand the offer, and improve on package. Discontinue walks/talks with low numbers and offer alternatives to keep things fresh and interesting. A lot of scope for improvement, but requires a full-on dedicated approach and time to implement. Involvement with Heritage Education to produce new programmes linked to heritage.

6.3 Partnership Links and Funding Sources

Partnerships – Seek more partnership working with outside partners such as the wildlife trust with a view to them developing further involvement especially where they already have involvement in our sites at Ryton and Pooley.

Contractors – Expand the use of contractors for maintenance of grounds where appropriate and consider district council option for emptying dog bins.

Buildings/Income Generation – Consider redevelopment of potential buildings e.g. office barn at Kingsbury currently housing 2 staff, could be reutilised as a retail/commercial outlet for craft workshops. The Annex building which is currently only used for visitors as a shelter when it's raining could be transformed into an office which could meet our office requirements. However, these options would require considerable redevelopment and expenditure to make buildings fit for purpose with no guarantees of future income generation. Explore turning over building at Pooley to restaurant/alternative enterprise.

Grants – Seek out potential grant funding for all the parks for any new capital items or buildings. New park play areas at Kingsbury and Ryton will require grant funding and possible heritage grant funding for the Beacon interpretation at Burton Dassett, and an application for natural assets grant for Hartshill Hayes.

Accreditation Schemes

Consider potential of awards for attracting and obtaining funding, and raising profile. The new free accreditation from Natural England is something to strive towards, especially as other Councils start to implement it. It is important that WCC is able to achieve national standards for Country Parks rather than becoming a 'poor relation'. However work will need to be done to achieve all the essential criteria for the scheme, mainly getting management plans and site access plans completed for all the parks. Fisheries Accreditation (Charter Mark) through Angling Development Board.

Outdoor learning – quality badge - The Quality Badge will be awarded to providers who have pledged to engage in an ongoing process to sustain high-quality learning outside

the classroom and who have demonstrated that they meet six quality indicators. The provider should:-

1. have a process in place to assist users to plan the learning experience effectively;
2. provide accurate information about its offer;
3. provide activities, experience or resources which meet learner needs;
4. review the experience and acts on feedback;
5. meet the needs of the users; and
6. have safety management processes in place to manage risk effectively.

As yet it is unknown if WCC will be going for this as a whole or individual service providers will have to apply themselves.

Fishing

- Employ an expert fisheries consultant to develop that part of the business to produce marketing and business plan, develop and run it as a successful business operation with practical help and support from ranger staff.
- Improve angling facilities and investigate further angling opportunities on the site.
- Maintain and enhance links with legislative bodies e.g. Education Authority and the links with Rodbaston College which are well placed to offer advice and carry out management tasks with their own student base.
- Continue to enhance the bank-side habitat.
- Investigate improved marketing through the Country Parks Marketing strategy.
- Encourage and implement good angling and fisheries management practice by adopting nationally recognised good practice.
- Investigate grant funding opportunities to develop fishery through Angling Trust and Angling Development Board. Angling now forms part of the national curriculum (under Sport).
- Lead person required to move forward.
- Carry out a review of fishery in five years' time.

Other

- Birthday parties – expand offer to include toddler play/ball park type experience.
- Jointly market special events with concession involvement.
- Xmas trees for sale – Kingsbury.
- Memorial woodlands at Kingsbury, Hartshill, Ryton.
- Wood turning selling unique woodland crafts in shops from Kingsbury wood.
- Other depts in WCC using country parks as a resource for away days/team building.
- Off peak use of rooms for art exhibitions/photographers.
- Investigate putting an Mountain Bike trail into Hartshill or Pooley similar to trails at Forestry Commission sites.
- Aim to meet essential criteria for Country Parks Accreditation scheme in 2010/11.

6.4 Challenges

- Cut backs on core funding for services considered 'non essential'.
- Recruitment freeze.
- Reduction of political support?
- Cost of central charges and relevance to the business of Country Parks.
- Succession planning for future retirees.
- Old infrastructure - temporary buildings at Hartshill have become rather more permanent and are no longer fit for purpose – require a new toilet block at least.

7. Management and Organisation

7.1 Structure Chart

See Appendix VI.

7.2 Roles

Rural Services Group Manager – Oversees the work of Rural Services, (Country Parks, Forestry and the Small Holdings Estate).

Visitor Development Manager – Responsible for operational management of the parks, including; marketing/publicity, recruitment, dealing with customer complaints/suggestions, risk assessments, ensuring events and education programmes are organised and implemented, overseeing retail and information facilities, concessions and leases, business and service planning including monitoring and reviewing the services and facilities provided. Prepare funding bids and seek partnerships/sponsorships. Manage income/expenditure and produce stats and reports as required.

Land Manager – Responsible for land, vehicles, equipment and land based training and development, project management; implementation of winter developments programme, ensure safe and effective operational land management practices, sales and acquisitions, and to protect the authority's interests in land within the portfolio.

Countryside Rangers – Responsible for the day to day practical management of sites, visitor engagement, help and support, assisting with education programme, opening/closing of sites and general site maintenance.

Reception Staff – Responsible for dealing with customer queries face to face, bookings, administration, selling and stocking items for shop and tea room.

Financial Administrator – Dealing with all orders/invoices, producing posters, events details, administration and assisting Visitor Manager with figures, letters, statistics.

Banking Clerk – Responsible for banking all park income.

Education Rangers – Responsible for providing educational programmes for schools/groups and outreach visits and Forest Schools.

8. Financial Plan

In 2009/10 the service was set the challenging target of reducing the gap between operational service costs and income generated by £50k. A further saving of £65k is required for 2010/11.

At the time of writing our forecast for 2009/10 shows that the £50k savings target will be reached. Rather than reducing expenditure, this is being achieved by welcoming more visitors and generating additional income as described in Section 6 of the plan. The current monthly income reports are included as Appendix III. At end of January, income from Kingsbury was up by 31% and for the other sites by 9%. At Kingsbury this has been partly attributable to a rise in parking fees from £2.50 to £3, but additional concessions and profit share arrangements with leaseholders have also paid dividends. Particularly pleasing is the very significant rise in income at Pooley Country Park (36%).

The table below shows the revenue budget for 2009/10 together with the latest forecasted outturn based upon end January. Note: The central administrative costs apportioned to Country Parks are excluded from the figures (to reflect the position if the parks operated as a separate business).

Table 1: Budget for 2009/10

	Approved budget 2009/10 (£)	Forecasted outturn (£)	Notes
Total Expenditure	839,266	863,897	
All staff costs	530,298	515,707	Vacant education post being covered by seasonal staff. 2 part time rangers replaced with caretaker/cleaner posts at lower grade
Premises and sites	176,507	182,010	
Vehicles and transport	31,717	34,427	
Supplies and services	99,305	129,016	
Other	1,439	2,737	
Total Income	554,414	629,622	
Parking	256,357	301,600	Poor July weather, but several record breaking months
Rents and concessions	139,126	167,700	Some new for 2009/10 + rent reviews/profit shares
Retail	72,000	72,202	
Fishing	28,377	28,377	Kingsbury lakes frozen over Dec 09 – Jan 2010
Events and education	33,170	33,467	
Other	25,384	26,276	
Net running costs	284,852	234,275	

In addition to the revenue budget, Country Parks have 3 capital budgets, 2 for specific projects and one en bloc for small works.

1. Pooley Arts Regeneration: 100% external capital investment from Homes and Communities Agency. £325k for a spiral path on the spoil heap, and art work/installation for the top of the heap, a new dedicated entrance, and improvements to the visitor welcome and site interpretation.
2. Connect2 Kenilworth: Sustainable transport project for walking/cycling route along the Kenilworth Greenway. £300k from National Lottery (People's Millions), £550k from the Local Transport Plan allocation.
3. En bloc small works allocation. £80k 2009/10 (£55k 2010/11 – to be agreed). Most of the £80k being carried forward as match funding towards grant bids for new play area at Kingsbury and improvements to access at Hartshill Hayes.

9. Monitoring and Evaluating the Plan

After the plans have been made and the policies followed, we need to judge whether we have arrived where we wanted to be. How well is the service performing in real terms? This section examines how we will track our progress against customer expectations and the business plan. A review of the first year 2009/10 can be found in Appendix VIII.

Warwickshire's parks service is a multi-faceted service so one single type of evaluation would not give a rounded picture. Our tactic is to use a mixed 'basket' of different evaluation methods:-

9.1 Performance Management System

Performance management is important to the County Council as a whole. Some of the Targets to which we work are agreed and monitored centrally. However, currently we are only assessed on visitor satisfaction levels.

It is anticipated that we should consider new performance indicators as detailed in this plan.

9.2 Financial Evaluation

The park's income and general financial position is very important to the County Council. Budget monitoring reports are produced monthly demonstrating any variances of concern that need managing.

Periodic meetings between the Parks Visitor Manager, Rural Group Manager and Departmental Finance Officer consider these and also any variations to the parks' budget made centrally (e.g. emergency budget cuts due to corporate matters).

The main review and reporting of the year's finances takes place after 'Closedown' of accounts following the end of the financial year.

9.3 Visitor Numbers

Car park figures are monitored weekly and produce a report based on an assumption of 2.9 visitors per car logged. During periods when the car parking charge applies, this can be cross checked against cash take.

9.4 Visitor Surveys

The Visitor Manager commissions an annual market research survey to establish the level of visitor satisfaction amongst actual users of the park. This is carried out by our own parks staff.

This takes the form of a face to face verbal questionnaire with a sample of between 200 and 600 visitors. The time of survey is varied from year to year to establish the effect of seasonal patterns and variations and ensure we gain a spread of different visitors' views.

9.5 Mystery Shopper Surveys

From time to time, mystery shopper surveys have provided a 'spot check' of various aspects of the park from customer welcome to park cleanliness.

9.6 In House Research

Occasionally we test customers' opinion on park policies and changes by conducting 'one off' surveys. This gives us an indication on whether we have 'got it right'. An example was the visitor survey in 2009 on proposed closure of the road up to Far Leys at Kingsbury Water Park, which gave us a pre-indication that this was acceptable to the majority (89%).

9.7 County Council's Complaints System

As part of a corporate system of monitoring user satisfaction, the County Council has a complaints system in place. Service users who are unhappy with any aspect of the Authority's services can register a complaint and are entitled to an acknowledgement within 5 working days and a formal reply within 20 working days.

The number and nature of complaints is monitored centrally and if a large number of complaints are received on one subject, the Complaints Officer may refer the issue to the Scrutiny Committee for County Councillors to investigate. This is a means of evaluating how services are doing against public expectations.

9.8 Customer Comment Cards

In all our parks customer comment cards are available which enable us to receive feedback from visitors. These are examined by the Visitor Manager, and action is taken as necessary.

9.9 Direct Customer Feedback

The most direct method for a park user to make their feelings known about aspects of their visit is to talk to a front line member of staff. Because they are always available and easy to find, shop staff tend to receive the majority of verbal comments. If a

number of comments on the same theme are received, this is fed upwards to line managers and immediate action is taken where necessary. If the issue needs wider consideration it is brought up at the Country Parks Management Team.

9.10 Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Standard (VAQAS) Inspection and Accreditation

VisitBritain, the organisation tasked with promoting quality in national tourism, produces a visitor attraction best practice guide and inspects attractions who apply for their Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance standard, using a team of salaried full-time inspectors. It is useful to look at the detail of the assessments to self-assess, and possibly join the scheme and be assessed by them as part of our growing involvement in North Warwickshire Tourism.

10. Appendices

Appendix I	Price List
Appendix II	Marketing Plan
Appendix III	Income Chart
Appendix IV	Parking Income – Price Elasticity
Appendix V	Key Maintenance and Development Schedule
Appendix VI	Structure Chart
Appendix VII	Action Plan Year 2010/11
Appendix VIII	Review of Year 2009/10