

Public
Key Decision - No

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

Meeting/Date: Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group –
17th November 2023

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Leisure, Waste and Street
Scene

Report by: Senior Ranger

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

This report summarises the summer months, the progress and issues over the period and provides a summary of the future months.

Recommendation:

The Group is asked to review and comment upon the report and progress made to date.

SENIOR RANGERS REPORT

1.1 STAFFING

- One Senior Ranger, one Ranger and one Assistant Rangers are based at Hinchingsbrooke with each working one weekend in three.
- One Staff member is carrying out an apprenticeship which involves working off site for a week at a time to attend college.

1.2 VOLUNTEERS

- Work-parties are continuing to work at full strength.
- SEN volunteer numbers are consistent. Some volunteers are trying different activities to increase their range of skills.
- Two additional Volunteer Wardens are supporting Rangers at weekends.

1.3 HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT

Mild wet weather through late summer helped the wildflower meadows to grow very well, using the new tractor and flail we were able to cut all meadows at the appropriate time.

- Meadows have been cut at appropriate times ensuring flowers were able to re-emerge from early cut areas, before we cut the later meadows.
- Cut materials from the meadows have been used to create hibernacula.
- Work has been done to clear culverts and drainage ditches, and we removed branches and other debris from the Alconbury Brook.
- We are continuing to work on upgrading the fence line between Bob's Wood and the Wildlife Wood.
- Higher priority tree safety jobs have been carried out.
- Planning has begun for our winter tree works, coppicing and glade creation.
- Planning has begun for our Christmas Grotto event.

And Looking Forward...

- Winter woodland works are due to start this month, initially dealing with tree safety jobs and then moving on to the coppicing of the New Plantation.
- We will create, host and tidy away our Christmas Grotto event so the countryside centre will be available to hire out again in the new year.
- Hedge laying will take place again this winter and we aim to finish the hedge around Christy Drive balancing pond.

1.4 COMMUNITY GROUPS

- Established groups are all operating well.
- Grafham Water Sports Centre trialled a “pay and play canoe hire” over the summer holidays. They were happy with the results and are looking to expand this cooperation with us next year.

1.5 SATELLITE SITES

Views Common

- Regular patrols and litter picking continue.

Stukeley Meadows

- The meadow with bee orchids has been cut correctly by Grounds Maintenance.
- Grounds Maintenance have continued to carry out management of this site except for the conservation of the Bee Orchids.

Spring Common

- Work to gather baseline data to improve the biodiversity over the site is going well and a lot of data has been gathered. We have hosted a citizen science day to work towards this with the local community.
- We are producing a new management plan.
- We are in discussion with Huntingdon Freeman’s Trust (who own the land) with view to working together to improve interpretation and assets to encourage wider use of the common.

1.6 CAFÉ

- The income in the café continues to rise above previous years.
- Q2 of 2023/24 has seen an increase of £15,000 on the same period last year.
- Introducing a new café menu including hot food going into the cooler months, has proved popular.
- Changing the layout of the café making it more spacious has helped.
- Having a permanent team has helped in the consistency of service and productivity.

Income across the café counter:

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Q 1	55,681	45,005	53,687	18,122	54,103	63,015	82,592
Q 2	52,600	51,962	64,649	52,314	44,350	77,723.	92,307
Q 3	33,364	38,896	29,348	23,188	32,584	50,612	
Q 4	28,249	43,749	24,999	24,958	35,366	56,047	
Total	£169,896	£179,612	£172,683	£118,582	£166,403	£247,399	£174,899

1.7 EVENTS, ACTIVITIES and PROMOTIONS

- “Mini explorer” days took place during the summer selling out every Thursday in the 6 weeks holiday.
- “Wild About Nature” for toddlers was a massive hit where children used their feet as paintbrushes.
- Christmas events are on sale with a total in excess of £6,000 so far. We are aiming for £20,000.

Exciting news this year is the launch of our SEND grotto with children who have additional needs. We have BSL sign interpreters who can offer deaf children the same experience other children will receive and will do story boards and a video to address those families who would like to attend with autistic children.

Event	items brought	expenditure	Income	pop up café
Indoor boot-sale 26th March	Banner	£ 100.00	£ 144.00	£ 208.00
Easter Trail	Eggs	£ 130.00	£ 650.00	
Indoor boot-sale 23rd April			£ 32.00	£ 82.00
Dog Show	banners	£ 65.00	£ 551.00	£ 300.00
Indoor boot-sale May			£ 120.00	
Robin Hood	advertising	£60	£ 282.00	
Mini explorer			£ 490.00	
Wild About Nature toddler event			£ 152.00	
Halloween	sweets	£ 10.00	£ 540.00	
Bonfire event	marshmallows	£5.00	£ 160.00	
Santa Grotto			£ 188.00	
Send Session		£ 370.00	£ 409.00	
Merry Berry				

Coming up...

Santa Paws	Dec 4th, 7 th and 8th
Santa's Grotto	Dec 2 nd , 3 rd , 16 th , 17 th , 18 th 19 th 20 th 21 st
SEND Santa's Grotto	Dec 9 th and 10 th
Cooking with Merry Berry	Dec 11 th , 12 th , 13 th , 14 th , 15 th
Naughty Elf Breakfast	Dec 22nd

1.8 COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

- The countryside manager continues to organise the usage of the centre, until it closes for the refurbishment. It will be managed then by the intended newly appointed commercial manager.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/2023	2023/2024
Bookings	408	412	42	124	199	118
Users	12965	12931	1033	3473	6160	3559
Income	£27,769	£31,590	£4,572	£14,150	£28,721	£19,662

Bookings with potential room hire of £6465 currently on the spread sheet with plenty of vacancies yet to fill in Q3 and Q4 of 2023/2024. Previously reported the countryside centre would need to close for construction work in 2024, this will now be open for the whole of 2024/25 so business can continue to grow.

1.9 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Having submitted the planning application, there were some objections which now must be addressed.

As a result, we have withdrawn the application and will resubmit, however this won't be possible until after the surveys and BNG matrix is updated – summer 2024. The construction will be deferred until 2025.

Mindful of the delay, now looking to appoint a project manager to oversee this process and the construction phases focussing on the investment.

	Elements	Estimated Completion Date
Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Development	Pre application	Feb March 2022
	Play installation	March/April 2022
	Planning application submission	July 2023
	Withdrawal of planning	Autumn 2023
	Address the objections including flood alleviation, tree protection, carpark design	Autumn to Summer 2024
	Planning application	Summer 2024
	Tender process	Autumn 2024
	Address planning conditions	Autumn/winter 2024
	Appointment of contractors	Jan 2025
	Construction phases start	Spring 2025
	Completion date including spring planting	Spring/summer 2026

HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK 2022/23 OUTTURN AND 2023/24 BUDGET AND FORECAST
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	2022/23 Outturn			2023/24 Forecast		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Forecast	Variance
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Hinchingbrooke Country Park and Management						
Staff	108	111	3	112	113	1
Running Costs	23	47	24	34	33	-1
Income	-15	-32	-17	-15	-11	4
Total	116	126	10	131	135	4
Countryside Centre						
Staff	28	19	-9	29	5	-24
Running Costs	18	12	-6	31	26	-5
Income	-22	-59	-37	-11	-47	-36
Total	24	-28	-52	49	-16	-65
Café						
Staff	57	74	17	65	121	56
Running Costs	65	106	41	90	106	16
Income	-155	-200	-45	-170	-200	-30
Total	-33	-20	13	-15	27	42
Total Hinchingbrooke Country Park	107	78	-29	165	146	-19

Comments on Variances

2022/23

General increase in running costs for the HCP management. Increased sales from the gift shop contributed to the increase in income.

Countryside centre room hire income has recovered to outpace pre-covid levels. Income from various events run throughout the year. Countryside support worker role was vacant during 22/23 which saw a large drop in employee costs. Low running costs.

Café income budget was increased in 22/23. There was an increase in the café income which was offset by increase in catering supplies cost. This extra footfall also saw an increase in employee costs.

2023/24

Budgets we realigned for 23/24, so the expectation is that the HCP management unit will be around net zero.

We are forecasting that the room hire income will continue to be strong in 23/24 as it was in 22/23. Countryside support worker role is expected to remain vacant during 23/24 which will see a large drop in employee costs.

The new café staffing structure has been put in place which has increased the employee costs in 23/24. Currently forecasting that the income/expenditure trend will be match 22/23's outturn.