

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT
A presentation from the Senior Ranger on park activities for the period November 2023 to April 2024

Meeting/Date: Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Group
19th April 2024

Executive Portfolio: Executive Member
Councillor Simone Taylor

Report by: Senior Ranger

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

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

Recommendation:

Committee 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.
- Work-parties occur regularly with volunteers to support the limited staff.
- Countryside Services and Open Spaces have had the opportunity to comment on a proposed restructure to merge Open Spaces and Countryside teams.

The purpose of this restructure is to ensure sustainability for the future and meet the needs of the corporate plan for the services to become more commercial.

Unusually a period of informal consultation has occurred allowing for comments and questions and have included meetings with the Assistant Director have occurred. This feedback has been taken on board and incorporated into the consultation document where appropriate, which will be formally launched in April.

There are no mandatory redundancies, and the structure identifies five new posts will be required.

The countryside manager will retire in the summer.

1.2 VOLUNTEERS

- Work-parties are continuing to work at full strength.
- SEN volunteers are consistent numbers.
- Weekend Volunteering is continuing. There remains availability for additional opportunities to assist during these two days.
- We hosted a corporate work party from Winter and Co. who helped install bird and bat boxes in Bob's Wood.

1.3 HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT

We have had a successful year for winter works, despite very mild and wet weather, and have been able to complete all the planned works in good time. This was helped by increased use of volunteers in the grotto, meaning rangers could continue with practical tasks.

- All meadows were cut as planned in Autumn.
- The tern raft has been covered over to prevent Black Headed Gulls colonising it before the Terns arrive.
- Trees identified as hazardous by the Arboriculture Team have been felled and the wood used to create habitat piles.
- Coppice plot in the New Plantation has been cut and a dead hedge constructed to protect coppice stools from deer damage.
- The third new glade has been opened up. Timber extraction and hibernacula creation have been delayed as the very wet mild weather has left the woodland floor too muddy for tractors to operate without causing damage.
- Support has been given to the events team in constructing and tidying up after the Santa's Grotto event.

- Restoration work has been carried out on the pond between Bob's Wood and The Wildlife Wood.
- The hazel triangle has been coppiced and the stakes used for hedge laying.
- The hedge around the balancing pond at The Glades, off Christie Drive has been completed.
- The winter pruning of the community orchard has been virtually completed and reduced to an appropriate height and shape. Some large walnut trees still need attention. Going forwards, it should be possible to have more community volunteers involved in the maintenance.
- Snowberry – a non-native invasive species has been removed from the site – this will inevitably re-grow so will need to be cut again.
- We have begun to prepare materials to create this year's waymarkers from wood produced as a by-product of our winter woodland works.

Looking Forward...

- Installation of interpretation features such as our waymarkers.
- Continuing to install more, new and improved, post and rail fencing to replace the old design which is starting to fail.
- Maintenance of park furniture such as picnic benches
- Supporting the events team with the Preparing and running easter holiday events.

1.4 COMMUNITY GROUPS

- Established groups are all operating well, including weekly Parkrun and monthly Zigzag runners, mountain bike training, and Huntingdon Canoe Club.
- The very wet months have forced the cancellation of some activities. Although the flood levels dropped significantly, and relatively quickly, the ground has remained saturated for 2 months.

1.5 SATELLITE SITES

Views Common Footpath

- Regular patrols and litter picking continue.
- There has been a marked rise in fly tipping incidents which have been reported to the Enforcement team.

Stukeley Meadows

- Regular patrols and litter picking continue.
- Bee orchids are present again and 45 individual plants were counted in March.
- Grounds Maintenance continue to carry out management of this site except for the conservation of the Bee Orchids.

Spring Common

- We have completed the new management plan for this site.
- Further interpretation materials that we will plan to install in the next period.

1.6 CAFÉ

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	61,852
Q 4	28,249	43,749	24,999	24,958	35,366	56,047	48,476
Total	£169,896	£179,612	£172,683	£118,582	£166,403	£247,399	£285,227

The café has seen a higher income this year and has been busier during the wetter days than other years. There is now a stable staff team with good customer service values and a friendly approach. The ever-changing menu has encouraged repeat visitors who know the produce will reflect seasons and trends.

The higher staffing costs have been unavoidable this year due to sickness and staff training.

1.7 EVENTS, ACTIVITIES and PROMOTIONS

Christmas was a tremendous success with extremely positive feedback on social media. The total income was lower than anticipated due to:

1. School holidays. The term ended very late so this affected the number of full days children could attend. However, after school sessions were provided.
2. SEND weekend. This was the first year that we offered a full weekend dedicated to those with additional needs, including a deaf Santa and signing elves, with the support of Peterborough Deaf Society. We had to run at half capacity to facilitate the time needed for the interpreters and to ensure children with autism were not overwhelmed or rushed.

As ever some trials of new events occurred.

Cooking with Merry Berry, operated in the café after it closed and gave the children the opportunity to make and decorate cakes and biscuits, with the assistance of the elves.

The Naughty Elf breakfast was a great addition to our Christmas events programme. Different to everything else, it was funny and relaxed but as ever all activities offered were good value for money and received positive feedback.

Coming up...

Bushcraft	4th April
Pizza Masterclass	10 th April
Bio blitz	11 th 12 th May
Bark in the Park	18 th May

1.8 COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

- Business support officer is now managing the booking process for the countryside centre. The countryside manager continues to oversee the day-to-day usage with support from onsite rangers.
- Within the proposed restructure, there will be a Hospitality Manager and Commercial Manager who will take on this responsibility.

	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	£26,500

The countryside centre will remain open as long as possible but will inevitably need to close late 2025 for the reconstruction, involving the extension to the conference rooms, toilets and café.

1.9 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

A new project manager has been appointed, to focus on the delivery of the project.

The planning application will be resubmitted in summer 2024 when the BNG (Biodiversity Net Gain) reports are completed, and the new submission will address the concerns raised in 2023.

Elements	Estimated Completion Date
Research for business case by PSC including stakeholder consultation	Completed Winter 2018
Public consultation	Completed 2018 to 2019
99-year lease agreed with CCC to 2121	Completed Summer 2021
NCS property consultants appointed. Project manager appointed	Completed Summer 2021
CIL funding agreed	Completed Spring 2022
Pre-Application	Submitted Spring 2022
Play Installation	Completed Autumn 2022
Pre-application feedback	Completed winter 2022
Biodiversity Audit	Completed Spring 2022
EPC	Completed Autumn 2022
Topographical Survey	Completed Autumn 2022
Building Condition Survey	Completed Spring 2023
UKPN Electrical Survey	Completed Spring 2023
Stakeholder and public consultation	Completed Autumn 2022
Tree Survey	Completed Summer 2023
Ground Condition Survey	Completed Summer 2023
Planning application submission	Completed summer 2023
Stakeholder and public consultation	Completed Autumn 2023
Application withdrawn	Completed Autumn 2023
Address comments and objections	ongoing
BNG report	Expected Summer 2024
Planning Application re-submission	Expected Summer 2024
Tender Process	September- November 2024
Appoint Contractors	Expected December 2024
Construction Phases	2025
Full Completion, including Spring Planting	Expected Spring 2026

HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK 2022/23 OUTTURN AND 2023/24 BUDGET AND ACTUAL
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	2022/23 Outturn			2023/24 Provisional Outturn		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Actual	Variance
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Hinchingbrooke Country Park and Management						
Staff	108	111	3	112	116	4
Running Costs	23	47	24	34	47	13
Income	-15	-32	-17	-15	-37	-22
Total	116	126	10	131	126	-5
Countryside Centre						
Staff	28	19	-9	29	18	-11
Running Costs	18	12	-6	31	11	-20
Income	-22	-59	-37	-11	-50	-39
Total	24	-28	-52	49	-21	-70
Café						
Staff	57	74	17	65	112	47
Running Costs	65	106	41	90	129	39
Income	-155	-200	-45	-170	-228	-58
Total	-33	-20	13	-15	13	28
Total Hinchingbrooke Country Park	107	78	-29	165	118	-47

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 were realigned for 23/24, so the expectation is that the HCP management unit will be around net zero, it has ended up being slightly better than the budget.

Room hire income has continued to be strong in 23/24 as it was in 22/23. The countryside support worker role was 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. The income/expenditure trend is slightly worse than 22/23's outturn, this will be down to inflationary pressures during 23/24.