

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

A presentation from the Senior Ranger on park activities
for the period July 2024 to Oct 2024

Meeting: Hinchingsbrooke Liaison group

Date: 15th November 2024

Executive Portfolio: Executive Member Simone Taylor

Report by: Head Ranger

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

This report summarises 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.

Head rangers report

1.1 STAFFING

A new staffing structure within the Parks & Countryside Service has been implemented, enabling the recruitment of key team members to enhance the management of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. This includes the addition of a Ranger, Assistant Ranger, and Weekend Wardens, strengthening our capacity to maintain the park and deliver a high-quality visitor experience.

Positives of the New Structure:

- **Increased Visitor Engagement:** With more staff, we can enhance visitor interactions, provide assistance, and ensure a safe and welcoming environment, especially during weekends and peak times.
- **Improved Park Maintenance:** A larger team allows for more consistent upkeep of trails, habitats, and park amenities, helping maintain ecological health and visitor enjoyment.

This new structure is instrumental in supporting both the conservation goals and community engagement objectives at the park.

1.2 VOLUNTEERS

The last few months have been productive for volunteer engagement at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park:

- **Work Party Numbers:** A total of 38 volunteer work parties have been held, involving a diverse range of activities focused on habitat maintenance and park improvements. One significant project was a trial of green haying, which proved effective for promoting native plant growth and managing grassland diversity.
- **Special Educational Needs (SEN) Notes:** We continue to accommodate volunteers with Special Educational Needs, ensuring supportive and inclusive participation in regular work activities.
- **Volunteer Recruitment:** Volunteer numbers are currently full, and no new recruitment has taken place, reflecting a stable and committed team with no recent departures.
- **Corporate Work Parties:** In August, a corporate work party from the NHS contributed valuable time and skills, mainly focusing on wildlife habitat enhancement. Key activities included the construction of bird and bat boxes, which support the park's biodiversity goals. Additionally, corporate work parties offer a modest income stream, directly supporting our conservation efforts.
- **Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park:** No updates regarding the Friends group at present; however, they remain actively engaged and continue to support park initiatives.

1.3 HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT

Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Management Overview

The management approach at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park aligns with Huntingdonshire District Council's corporate and service plans, focusing on enhancing biodiversity, maintaining infrastructure, and ensuring a high-quality visitor experience. From July to October, specific seasonal tasks are completed to support both ecological health and public use, with a particular focus on preparing habitats for winter and managing visitor impacts during the busier summer months.

Key Management Tasks and Strategic Goals

1. Biodiversity and Habitat Management:

- **Late Summer Green-Haying and Meadow Maintenance:** From July through early autumn, green-haying trials in select meadow areas have helped improve soil conditions and support diverse native wildflowers. This promotes a habitat favourable to pollinators and small mammals and aligns with corporate environmental goals.
- **Scrub and Tree Thinning:** During this period, scrub control and targeted thinning of trees in compartments like the Eastern Woodland help maintain open glades, supporting a variety of bird and insect species.
- **Invasive Species Control:** Efforts to manage invasive plants, including species that can dominate waterways and shorelines, are also prioritised in the summer months to prevent them from spreading further during the autumn.

2. Visitor Experience and Safety:

- **Pathway and Amenity Upgrades:** Between July and October, pathways receive extra maintenance due to increased summer footfall, including mowing of path edges and repairs to surface wear. Additional litter collections ensure paths remain clean and safe, supporting district goals for high-quality public amenities.
- **Seasonal Signage and Information Updates:** Updated information boards and wayfinding signs guide visitors and provide information on seasonal wildlife sightings, safety reminders, and conservation updates, improving visitor experience and engagement.

3. Collaborative Partnerships and External Funding:

The park's work is supported by strong partnerships with local volunteer groups, the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, and corporate partners. In late summer, these partnerships bring in corporate volunteer days that contribute to projects such as bird box installations and habitat enhancement, funded through both council resources and external grants.

Looking Forward: Planned Activities

Upcoming initiatives outlined in the management plan for the autumn and winter months include:

- **Woodland and Meadow Preparation for Winter:** Preparations involve targeted glade creation, brush clearance, and habitat pile installations, which provide shelter for wildlife over winter.
- **Improved Wetland and Watercourse Management:** Dredging and water level adjustments are planned to improve aquatic habitats, helping maintain conditions that support diverse wetland species through the colder months.

These activities are designed to foster a sustainable environment for both wildlife and visitors, with long-term outcomes expected to strengthen park ecosystems.

Additional Tasks and Resource Considerations

In addition to planned tasks, the team addressed some unanticipated needs, such as additional invasive plant removal and high-impact path repair due to heavy summer visitor traffic. Adjustments in staffing and volunteer coordination ensured that these immediate needs were met without compromising scheduled conservation work.

1.4 COMMUNITY GROUPS

There have been no new community groups introduced at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park during this period, and participation levels among existing groups have remained steady. We continue to engage our current community partners through ongoing communication, collaborative conservation projects, and events tailored to their interests and contributions.

The stable involvement of these groups, including local volunteer organizations and Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, has been invaluable. Their work on-site supports essential conservation tasks, from habitat maintenance to species monitoring, and promotes a strong sense of community ownership and pride in the park.

1.5 SATELLITE SITES

Views Common Footpath

There are no significant updates for Views Common Footpath. Routine maintenance, including path clearing and signage upkeep, ensures safe, accessible routes for park visitors. This maintenance supports council goals for public safety and accessibility, encouraging outdoor activity and enhancing visitor experience in line with corporate objectives for community well-being.

Stukeley Meadows

A significant update for Stukeley Meadows this year was the construction of a new wildlife pond in collaboration with the Groundworks Team and local volunteers. This pond aims to enhance local biodiversity by providing a habitat for amphibians, birds, and invertebrates, aligning with council goals for

environmental stewardship and conservation. The partnership with Groundworks and volunteer groups allowed for efficient resource use and community involvement, contributing to sustainable habitat creation.

Spring Common

There are no new updates for Spring Common at this time. Regular monitoring and management ensure that this area remains a valuable habitat, supporting local wildlife while also providing an accessible, natural space for the public. The focus remains on preserving the existing habitat in line with council goals for maintaining green spaces that benefit both wildlife and community members.

1.6 CAFÉ

Income across the café counter:

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Q 1	55,681	45,005	53,687	18,122	54,103	63,015	82,592	73,219
Q 2	52,600	51,962	64,649	52,314	44,350	77,723	92,307	93,172
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	£166,390.9

For the 2024/25 financial year, café income at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park has seen strong performance in the first two quarters. Quarter 1 brought in £73,219, followed by a notable increase in Quarter 2 to £93,172. This growth reflects a consistent year-over-year improvement and suggests heightened visitor engagement and café use during peak seasons. The increase in income aligns with efforts to enhance the visitor experience, and if trends continue, the café is on track to surpass last year's annual income, supporting park operations and maintenance.

1.7 EVENTS, ACTIVITIES and PROMOTIONS

Event Overview and Purpose

Hinchingsbrooke Country Park has been host to a wide variety of events, with a total of 23 events that appealed to a range of age groups and interests. These events are designed to engage the community, educate participants about the natural environment, and promote well-being through outdoor activities. Here are some highlighted examples:

1. Mini Explorers (August):

- a. **Purpose:** Mini Explorers sessions encourage young children to explore the natural world through hands-on activities. Each session aims to spark curiosity about nature, with activities tailored to enhance sensory learning and physical movement.
- b. **Participant Expectations:** Families expect interactive, child-friendly activities that allow children to explore and learn safely.
- c. **Outcomes:** High attendance in August sessions demonstrated the popularity of these events among young families. Positive feedback

noted an increase in children's engagement with nature, helping to build early connections to environmental stewardship.

2. **Bushcraft Orienteering (August 21):**

- a. **Purpose:** This event introduces participants to basic survival and navigation skills within a woodland environment. It aims to foster teamwork, problem-solving, and a connection to nature.
- b. **Participant Expectations:** Attendees look forward to learning practical skills in a hands-on setting, with guidance on orienteering and safe bushcraft practices.
- c. **Outcomes:** The event was well-attended and highly rated, with participants gaining confidence in outdoor skills and reporting a greater understanding of how to safely explore natural areas. Repeat sign-ups for similar events reflect ongoing interest.

The **Wild About Huntingdon Festival**, originally scheduled for September 2024, was planned as a large community event celebrating local wildlife and conservation efforts. It was set to include interactive wildlife activities, educational stalls, and eco-friendly crafts, all aimed at raising environmental awareness and fostering community involvement in nature. Unfortunately, due to severe flooding in September, the event had to be cancelled. It has now been rescheduled for 2025, ensuring that this valuable community festival will return when conditions are safer and more accessible for all.

General Outcomes

Overall, these events have seen strong engagement, with high attendance reflecting community interest in outdoor learning and recreation. Feedback has shown that participants appreciate the variety and educational focus of the events, reinforcing the park's role as a community hub for environmental education and outdoor enjoyment.

1.8 COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

The Countryside Centre has experienced variable usage trends over the past few years. Bookings and user numbers have not fully rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, with year-to-date figures for 2024/25 indicating 92 bookings and 2,993 users so far. However, revenue from room hire has shown resilience, with this year's revenue to date at £27,280, nearly matching the previous year's total. This suggests an increase in larger bookings and longer rental periods, possibly as customers return to in-person meetings and events.

Trends and Patterns in Use

- **Usage Trends:** A trend toward smaller group bookings and cautious re-engagement remains, although figures show signs of gradual recovery. Compared to previous years, fewer bookings are yielding relatively strong revenue, possibly due to longer duration or larger groups.
- **Significant New Customers:** While there have been no significant new block bookings this year, some returning customers have booked larger sessions, indicating renewed interest from groups and organizations.

- Patterns in Demand: Usage has been more consistent in midweek periods, with increased interest in late afternoons and evenings for community and recreational groups. This pattern may reflect a growing interest in accessible meeting spaces for community activities after regular working hours.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25 YTD
Bookings	408	412	42	124	199	118	92
Users	12965	12931	1033	3473	6160	3559	2993
Room Hire	£27,769	£31,590	£4,572	£14,150	£28,721	£26,500	£27,280