

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held in The Wren Room, Countryside Centre, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park on Friday, 30 March 2012.

PRESENT: Councillor M G Baker – Chairman.
Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, Mrs L Kadic and R J West.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor N J Guyatt.

IN ATTENDANCE: Miss H Ali, Mrs J Arnold and Mr J Craig.

9. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14th October 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

10. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

11. SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

In receiving and noting the content of the Senior Ranger's report, comment was made as follows:-

(a) Staffing

Members were advised that following a recent restructure of the Council's Operations Division, Mr J Craig, Green Spaces Manager would be responsible overall for Countryside Services. It is intended that structural changes would now be made to the Countryside Service, with a review of all job roles and responsibilities currently being undertaken. Whilst it was reported that the restructure might result in redundancies, assurances were delivered that efforts would be made to ensure that this was the last option available. At the request of the Chairman, Mr J Craig undertook to keep the Group informed of any developments and reported that he had initiated discussions with County Council Officers to consider the review of the service.

(b) Volunteers

In noting that 674 volunteers had presented themselves at the Countryside Centre between September 2011 and March 2012 inclusive, the Group were encouraged to learn the value of the contributions received from volunteers across the whole of Countryside Services as being £205,000 for the first three

quarters of the financial year. The Senior Ranger reported that she was yet to re-calculate these figures to take into account the number of volunteers assisting the service over the final quarter.

(c) Countryside Centre

Details of the number of users of the Countryside Centre for the period September 2011 to February 2012 compared to previous years were presented. Income from the Centre was reported as being low when compared to the previous year's figures. The Senior Ranger reported that this was attributable to users reducing their expenditure on hospitality offered by the Countryside Centre.

(d) Café

In noting that expenditure on café employees had significantly been reduced from £110,000 to £50,000 over previous years, the Group were pleased to note that £110,000 in income from the Café had been generated over the 2011/12 financial year. Members were advised that Café income was heavily reliant on the weather, however there have been occasions where up to £1,000 in income had been generated on a single day. Members have placed on record their concern over the impact the long term absence of a café employee is having upon the Country Park, given the fact that the Senior Ranger is currently providing cover in the Café. In response, it was confirmed that options for voluntary and external support were currently being explored.

(e) Events and Activities

The Senior Ranger informed the Group of the various events and activities that had been held since the last meeting. The production of an Events Leaflet is now being undertaken by Rangers, resulting in a saving of approximately £5,000 - £6,000 per annum. Members were encouraged to note the turnout for the Sport Relief Mile event which had attracted 485 participants on the day.

(f) Wider District

Members noted that a range of work had been undertaken in other parts of the District under the Countryside Services remit. Particular mention was made of the work undertaken at Holt Island, a significant proportion of which had been undertaken by volunteers.

(g) Park Management

The Senior Ranger informed the Group of the various work undertaken at the Country Park which included tree surveys, hedge planting, completion of the bird hide, installation of play equipment for younger children, relocation of gym equipment together with hay cutting around the lake and the redecoration of the toilets in the Visitor Centre.

(h) Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park

It was reported that the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Park had raised £280 from their Christmas Shopping Day event.

The Senior Ranger drew Members' attention to the receipt of £9,000 Lotto Grant from the Hunts Bee Association which would be utilised to erect a bee shed within the Country Park. This would be used primarily for educational purposes. Further opportunities such as running training courses for potential bee keepers and the sale of honey would arise as a result of this project.

Members also noted the fundraising efforts of the Friends of Paxton Pits Nature Reserve who had donated a sum of £20,000 to the Park for works to the site.

(i) Budget

The Group noted the impact of recent budget cuts upon the Countryside Service. Having had their attention drawn to the financial information for County Park, Members noted that an income budget of £198,000 for the 2012/13 financial year had been set. It was confirmed to Members that this would be an achievable target. Other matters that were discussed included the Repairs and Renewals Fund and the budget line referring to Supplies and Services.

At the conclusion of their discussions, the Group thanked the Senior Ranger for delivering a comprehensive report.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor R J West drew the Group's attention to the fact that the Chairman had recently received an MBE Award. In so doing, the Group placed on record their congratulations to Councillor M G Baker for his longstanding commitment to the local community.

In response to questions, it was confirmed that the Countryside Service reported to the District Council's Executive Members for Environment and Healthy and Active Communities. Dependent upon the subject matter in question, the Portfolio Holders were accountable to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels (Economic Well-Being) and (Social Well-Being).

Other matters that were discussed included the Green Corridor between St Neots and Earith, a scheme that was being pursued as part of Ouse Valley Way and the Great Fen Project. Additionally, the Group welcomed the work undertaken at Godmanchester Nursery which had been funded by Urban and Civic.

Councillor Mrs L Kadic offered her assistance to the Senior Ranger in generating third party funding for projects for the Country Park.

In discussing the forthcoming restructure of Countryside Services, Mr J Craig reported that it was likely that post titles would be changed as a result of the review.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting would be held on Friday, 12th October 2012.

Chairman