

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held in the the Wren Room, Countryside Centre, Hinchingsbrooke Countryside Park on Friday, 14 October 2016.

PRESENT: Councillor R J West – Chairman.
Councillors Ashcroft, Mrs A Dickinson and T Hayward.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors R C Carter.

IN ATTENDANCE: .

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

That District Councillor R West be elected as the Chairman of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Following which Councillor R West took chairmanship of the meeting.

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2016 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest received from those Members that were present.

4. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

That District Councillor A Dickinson be appointed as the Vice-Chairman of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

5. MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

The Membership of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for 2016/17 was noted as follows:

(a) **Cambridgeshire County Council**

Councillor P Ashcroft

(b) Huntingdonshire District Council

Councillors R C Carter, Ms A Dickinson, T F Hayward and R J West.

The Group welcomed County Councillor P Ashcroft as the new County Council Member to the meeting and expressed their satisfaction at finally having Cambridgeshire County Council representation at the meeting.

6. SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

In receiving and noting the content of the Senior Ranger's report on park activities for the period March – August 2016, comment was made in relation as follows:

Volunteers

Volunteers provided significant assistance to the Rangers and details of the various volunteers were provided within the report, including one who was studying ecology at university. A university student had previously used Paxton Pitts to complete their studies and it was noted amongst the Joint Group how it could raise the profile of the Park if it too was used for the same purposes.

Park Management

During the spring and summer the wide ranging role of the Rangers focussed on the visitor experience such as dealing with first aid incidents, litter collection and answering queries as well as the main practical tasks of mowing, strimming and hedge-cutting.

Over the next three to six months the Rangers would focus on larger scale works.

Unfortunately, the Park had experienced small scale vandalism, in particular to the fence around the play area and one of the new outdoor shelters.

Staff at the Park had attended an Away Day at Ferry Meadows in Peterborough which had been useful to generate new ideas for the Park. Rutland Water Nature Reserve had been considered as the venue. However, the costs had made it too prohibitive and the Great Fen had been unable to accommodate on the chosen date. It was confirmed that the Team would consider organising another Away Day in the future and had also offered reciprocal arrangements to the Staff at Ferry Meadows

Café

The Park and consequently the Café had been busy during the summer due to the weather which had resulted in an increase in café revenue in comparison to the previous financial year.

This had been assisted by the Park being the venue for the Active

Lifestyles Sports Taster Day on 24 July 2016 where nearly 1000 people had attended the event.

In response to a question it was hoped that the Park would host another Active Lifestyles Sports Taster Day. However, this was dependant on the Active Lifestyles Team successfully securing the necessary funding from grants and lottery funding.

It was noted that the various improvements within the Café had been successful including the removal of some internal seating, the introduction of a simplified summer menu and contactless card payment to improve serving customers.

Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park

A new Committee having been formed was working effectively and currently looking to establish a bird box sponsor scheme to provide much needed nest sites to raise additional income. The Friends had recently agreed to provide a new Tern raft (similar to the very successful ones at Paxton Pits), and were considering other priorities for future funding bids.

In response to questions it was explained that the Committee consisted of approximately seven people with a membership of 120. As a registered charity the support of the Friends was vital as they were able to access grants for various projects to improve facilities throughout the Park.

To fully appreciate the work of the Friends, the Joint Group requested that a report be presented to its next meeting as it would be beneficial to understand the Projects they had undertaken.

The Chairman had unfortunately been unable to attend the last Friends' Annual General Meeting. However, hoped to attend the next Annual General Meeting which would be held on 24 May 2017.

Financial Position

Members' attention was drawn to the financial position of the Park. It was noted that the increase in income entered into the Café budget as part of the Zero Based Budget exercise had been achieved and was expected to be exceeded.

The Joint Group congratulated the staff at the Park for the positive financial position within the budget.

It was enquired whether the savings required to be generated via the budget process was having a detrimental impact on services provided and Countryside Services Team. It was explained that when considering the budgets for the forthcoming financial year it was necessary to look at resources differently. For instance volunteers provided a vital service for the Park. However, there were resource implications and the Park needed to be mindful of how many volunteers it recruited due to the training requirements. A recent training event provided to volunteers on bush cutting had been economically viable at a cost of £1,000 as it had trained twelve

people. It was noted that the Park was considering hosting a recruitment day for volunteers.

The Joint Group acknowledged that although the cost of a service was able to be identified it was the value that was not always realised. The Joint Group stated that it was important to value the current services and expressed concern that if the budget was further reduced the impact this would have on vital services.

The Joint Group was particularly disappointed that the post of Tree Warden had been deleted last year as part of the Zero Based Budget exercise. The Joint Group considered this was an essential service that did not cost a significant amount. The service also impacted on the Town and Parish Councils, who it was noted had been approached to consider whether they would be willing to contribute funds to re-establish the post.

Whilst discussing matters relating to the Park one of the Members, being a frequent user of public transport, noted that it was difficult to access the Park on a Sunday using the Stagecoach bus service as the B Route 'Peterborough, Huntingdon, St Ives to Cambridge' terminated at Huntingdon Railway Station. This created significant problems for passengers wanting to access Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, in particular for passengers that were less mobile and unable to walk the considerable distance to either Hinchingsbrooke Hospital or Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, resulting in the additional expense of the need to use the services of a taxi.

Given that Sunday was generally when people had the time to visit friends or relatives in hospital and for leisure pursuits, the Joint Group agreed that it would be of mutual benefit for the B service to be provided on a Sunday to Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, as this would increase both passenger numbers and visitors to the Country Park.

The Joint Group subsequently tasked Chairman of the Group to write a letter to the Managing Director of Stagecoach to request consideration of the matter.

7. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

that the press and public be excluded from the meeting because the business to be transacted contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

8. CONTRACTURAL ARRANGEMENTS AND POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME, HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK

The Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group gave consideration to an exempt report by the Head of Operations (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) regarding the contractual arrangements and potential improvement programme at

Hinchingbrooke Park, detailed within the submitted report.

During discussions on the matter the Group noted the lack of engagement that Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) had taken in Hinchingbrooke Country Park, given that there had been no County Council attendance at the meetings until the recent appointment of County Councillor Ashcroft.

In addition to the significant revenue burden that the District Council incurred for the maintenance of the Park, the Council also invested considerable Officer time and effort in ensuring the Park continued to operate as a success.

The Group acknowledged that the Park was much more than a community asset – it was a prime green space that included a significant area of biodiversity that required sensitive management and protection, as well as providing a variety of recreational and nature conservation activities.

Having been considered by the Hinchingbrooke Country Park Joint Group, the report was to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Communities and Customers) prior to determination by the Cabinet.

In noting the contractual arrangements in place and their implications, the Group endorsed the recommendations as contained within the exempt report and made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet, whereupon it was

RESOLVED:

to endorse the recommendations as contained within the submitted exempt report, including the additional recommendations to the Cabinet.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Group noted that their next meeting would be held on 24 March 2017 at 10am.

Chairman