

A meeting of the **HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP** will be held in the **WREN ROOM, COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE, HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK, BRAMPTON ROAD, HUNTINGDON, PE29 6DB** on **FRIDAY, 13 MARCH 2020** at **10:00 AM** and you are requested to attend for the transaction of the following business:-

AGENDA

APOLOGIES

1. **MINUTES** (Pages 3 - 6)

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting held on 11th October 2019.

Contact Officer: H Peacey - (01480) 388007

2. **MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

To receive from Members declarations as to disclosable pecuniary and other interests in relation to any Agenda item.

Contact Officer: Democratic Services - (01480) 388169

3. **SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT** (Pages 7 - 12)

To receive a report by the Senior Ranger on park activities for the period September 2019 to March 2020.

Contact Officer: M McGettigan - (01480) 388666

4. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

To note that the next meeting of the Hinchingsbrooke Park Joint Group will be held on 16th October 2020 at 10:00am.

Contact Officer: H Peacey - (01480) 388007

5 day of March 2020



Head of Paid Service

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Non-Statutory Disclosable Interests

Further information on [Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Non - Statutory Disclosable Interests](#) is available in the Council's Constitution

Filming, Photography and Recording at Council Meetings

The District Council permits filming, recording and the taking of photographs at its meetings that are open to the public. It also welcomes the use of social networking and micro-blogging websites (such as Twitter and Facebook) to communicate with people about what is happening at meetings.

Arrangements for these activities should operate in accordance with [guidelines](#) agreed by the Council.

Please contact Habbiba Peacey, Democratic Services Officer, Tel No: 01480 388169 / email: Habbiba.Peacey@huntingdonshire.gov.uk if you have a general query on any Agenda Item, wish to tender your apologies for absence from the meeting, or would like information on any decision taken by the Group.

Specific enquiries with regard to items on the Agenda should be directed towards the Contact Officer.

Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting as observers except during consideration of confidential or exempt items of business.

Agenda and enclosures can be viewed on the [District Council's website](#).

Emergency Procedure

In the event of the fire alarm being sounded and on the instruction of the Meeting Administrator, all attendees are requested to vacate the building via the closest emergency exit.

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held in the Wren Room, Countryside Centre, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, PE29 6DB on Friday, 11 October 2019.

PRESENT: Councillor R J West – Chairman.

Councillors Mrs A Costello, J M Palmer and Mrs S R Wilson.

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor R J West be elected Chairman of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Councillor R J West in the Chair.

2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 4th April 2019 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Mrs S R Wilson declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in Minute No. 19/6 by virtue of her membership of Godmanchester Town Council.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that District Councillor J M Palmer be appointed 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 2019/20 was noted as follows:

(a) Cambridgeshire County Council (appointment until 2021)

Councillor Mrs A Costello.

(b) Huntingdonshire District Council

Councillors J M Palmer, T D Sanderson, R J West and Mrs S R Wilson.

6 SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

The Group received and noted the contents of the Senior Ranger's report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on park activities for the period March - September 2019. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing

Members were informed of the challenges with staffing at the Country Park which included the long term absence of a member of staff at the nursery and the unusually high turnover of staff in the café. The Countryside Services Manager explained the issues experienced with younger staff at the café and the need to incentivise them more to proactively fulfil their roles.

Volunteers

Having been encouraged to note the success of the Summer Volunteer Thank You evening, the Senior Ranger reported that the Green Team voluntary disabled group were due to return to the Park in October 2019. It was not yet known how much time the team would be able to devote owing to a shift towards a more educational approach to their work.

Park Management

The Group were encouraged to note the range of work undertaken at the site over the summer months which included the installation of new bins which had been funded via a grant by Park Run, bench maintenance, repainting and re-staining park signage and cutting back overgrown vegetation from paths and maintenance of the wildflower meadows.

Planned works for the winter months included further maintenance work of the wildflower meadows, path maintenance on the top bridle ride in Bob's Wood, opening of glades in woodland areas to encourage the growth of woodland flowers and tree felling. Comment was made by a Member that a more robust solution was required for the maintenance of footpaths. The Senior Ranger responded by informing the Group that he would be looking at alternative options once the current stock of path maintenance material had been utilised.

Questions were raised around the removal of play equipment from the play park as a result of routine health and safety checks. Concern was expressed that the equipment had been removed in August 2019 and not yet returned. The Senior Ranger reported that the Development Manager had been liaising with the contractor, but that a date for its return was not yet known.

Community Groups

It was reported that the Manager of the Fireflies Forest School had now become a committee member of the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park. Members noted that the Huntingdonshire Bee Keepers Association had commenced refurbishment works to their viewing gallery and that weekly Mindfulness Walks had recently started in the Park.

The Chairman commented that he had attended the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park on 2nd May 2019 and commended the Countryside Manager for her talk on the Park's 30th Anniversary Celebrations. It had been enlightening to see how the Park had developed over the years.

Café

Despite the extremely hot weather, £155,000 of income had been generated by the café over the first half of the financial year, which represented approximately 70% of the budget. Following a question raised by a Member, it was confirmed that café staff were employed on a zero hours contracts.

Events, Activities and Promotions

Events which had taken place over the reporting period included the Father's Day BBQ, Robin Hood event and the Country Park's 30th Birthday celebrations. Events due to be held over future months were currently being advertised on site and especially via Facebook which is currently the most used method of research by the Park's target groups.

Countryside Centre

Attention was drawn to occupancy levels, the number of bookings taken and the revenue generated at the Countryside Centre between April to August 2019. In noting the percentage of bookable time used in the Countryside Centre each month based on one full time member of staff, the Countryside Services Manager explained to Members how these figures had been calculated.

Financial Position

Members' attention was drawn to the financial position of the Park. Having had their attention drawn to the variances, it was explained that this was largely a result of savings in staff costs for the Country Park and Management and the Countryside Centre. It was however reported that the café had overspent by £10,000 which largely related to expenditure on café assistants as there is no budget allocation for those on zero hours contracts.

Income from S106 projects were also coming to the end of their life. This would impact upon the accounts at the end of the financial year and future years, necessitating the need for the development proposals at the Country Park to commence sooner rather than later.

Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Development Proposals

Councillor J M Palmer advised the Group that the development proposals for the Country Park had been delayed a year owing to protracted negotiations with Cambridgeshire County Council. The Head of Operations then went on to explain that the District Council would not be able to sustain the £100,000 loss each year for the next 7 years without the development proceeding.

The County Council's Investment and Assets Committee had asked for clarity on the proposals. Consultants had been commissioned to review the business plan

and modelling and to undertake a comparison with Milton Country Park. In terms of the latter, comment was made that the two sites were unique with their own individual constraints. The Head of Operations then went on to explain that discussions were also underway with an expert from Sport Lakes Trust who manage Milton Country Park.

For the benefit of Councillor Mrs S R Wilson, Councillor J M Palmer provided background to the development proposals explaining the period of time left on the lease with the County Council, the financial loss incurred by the District Council to subsidise the Park, the proposals to enhance and expand the facilities on site, the level of investment proposed and the difficulties that were being experienced in getting the County Council on board.

In the short term, alternative solutions for raising income at the Park were currently being identified by Officers. This included the sale of wood from felled trees, outdoor cinema events with bars and re-enactments within the Park.

The Head of Operations advised that he would look to arrange a presentation for County Council Members on the process employed by the District Council's consultants to develop the business plan and to provide an outline of the benefits of the proposals.

Future Parks

A brief outline of the National Trust's Future Parks initiative was then delivered. District Council Officers were engaging proactively with the scheme which included participants from across the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area. Members were encouraged to note that participants experienced similar challenges to that of the District Council and that it was proving useful to learn from and share experiences. The initiative would seek to produce best practice documents for the sector.

Paxton Pits Nature Reserve

In response to a question raised by a Member, background on the history of Paxton Pits nature reserve was delivered to the Group. Members were encouraged to note that the long awaited expansion proposals would come into fruition over the year, offering a number of opportunities. The Friends of Paxton Pits were a very large and active group, regularly contributing to projects and schemes in the area.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group would be held on 13th March 2020 at 10:00am.

Chairman

Senior Ranger's Report

September 2019 – March 2020

Matthew M^cGettigan

STAFFING

Staffing levels have remained constant with one day a week covering the Nursery. This has put pressure on the workload particularly noticeable with chainsaw work – which is more common over the winter and has been needed in response to the recent storms. Chainsaws cannot be operated alone so some safety work has had to wait for enough staff and volunteers to be in. Some hazardous trees have been cordoned off with barrier tape to reduce the risk to the public.

The nursery is formerly being transferred to Godmanchester Town Council from 31/03/2020.

VOLUNTEERS

The two weekly work-parties have continued and numbers are buoyant with an average of 86 volunteer days per month. The Green Team volunteers attend site regularly during term times.

HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT

Since the September meeting, Rangers and Volunteers have been making good progress on several jobs. In addition to the park management we've been very involved in assisting with the Halloween and Christmas Events.

The following tasks have been completed:

- Finish cutting the wildflower meadows and creating habitat piles
- Installing a Forest Schools area at Brampton Village School
- Assisting with fruit tree pruning at the Community Nursery
- Cutting back around the balancing ponds on Dartmoor Drive and Christie Drive
- Assisting with the Halloween Event
- Decorating the countryside centre for the grotto and New Year's Eve Party
- Assisting with the Christmas Grotto
- Winter orchard pruning work at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park
- Hedge-laying around the orchard
- Refurbishing the Apiary area with new fence and roofing
- Replace damaged signs on life buoys around the Main Lake
- Tree safety works

We have not processed felled wood as we have more than we were able to sell and use in the Countryside Centre this year. We already have a split and seasoned supply for next year, and a felled but not split supply for future use.

We have now been granted a felling licence so will be able to hit the ground running next year, making an early start to accommodate work needed for the Christmas events.

Looking forward we intend to carry out the following tasks before the next Senior Ranger's Report is written.

- Finish hedge-laying
- Replace the bridge in View's Common with a culvert (as it's showing signs of damage and may soon become unsafe)
- Resurface worn areas of path – particularly around the Main Lake, near zebra crossing and south of countryside centre
- Refurbish and repair park furniture in accordance with the refurbishment plan
- Begin mowing amenity grassland areas and grass paths
- Assist with preparation for and running of Spring and Summer Events
- Plan and lead 6 ranger guided walks.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

We have continued to work closely with a number of community groups:

- **Fireflies Forest School** have continued to be very popular despite the wintery weather. We are currently exploring opportunities to work together to provide some shelter for them that is in keeping with the forest schools ethos.
- **Park Run** has had to cancel a couple of days due to the very wet weather, but attendance has been high despite the weather when the event has run.
- **Huntingdonshire Beekeeper's Association** have been very busy during the apiary's closed season with refurbishments. The planned grand opening date is 9th April 2020.

SATELLITE SITES

Views Common, Stukeley Meadows and Spring Common have been regularly litter picked. We spent some time cutting back willow in Spring Common to keep compliant with our Stewardship obligations. We also visited Stukeley Meadows to cut back some Cherry trees that were blocking a pathway. This is mown by Grounds Maintenance team, so this is ready for them to start the annual mowing regime in spring.

COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

A positive year with some new users and a predicted total income approximately £4,000 over budget.

12 room bookings to the value of £4,756 have been paid in advance for 2020/2021. This money will be carried into next financial year.

There are 184 bookings already for the next financial year with a revenue of £12,685.00.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Countryside centre bookings	204	339	408	412
Countryside centre number of users	7253	11404	12965	12931

CAFÉ

We reported that Q1 and Q2 were extremely successful however Q3 and Q4 have been badly affected by the weather. Significantly long periods of wet or windy weather have reduced footfall and therefore café customers. Sunday 9th February – Storm Ciara – and took only £42.20 and Sunday 17th February – storm Dennis only £163.00. Income generated during half term was lower than that.

	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 2020	% of last year
Quarter 1 April - June	£55,681	£45,005	£53,687	+ 8,682
Quarter 2 July – September	£52,600	£51,962	£64,650	+12,688
Quarter 3 October – December	£33,364	£38,896	£29,348	--9,548
Quarter 4 January - March	£28,249	£43,749	£18,676 to 23/02/2020	
Total	£169,896	£179,612	So far £166,361 (budget is £155,000)	

To address this, work is progressing to increase income in winter in a variety of ways by having OAP days and introducing Friendship café. Whilst initiatives like this can't change the weather, on days of generally low customer numbers such as Mondays this may create a small but regular group of customers.

Looking ahead for the summer, we are aware that we lose custom as service is slow with only one till. We are currently looking at a transformation bid of £10-£15K to change the flow of the café and increase the self-serve layout. The business case suggests we could bring in an additional £3,000 to £5,000 over the summer holidays by adding one extra till. We are intending to change the type of food served with a new fast cook oven (similar to those used in Greggs) so we can reduce staff numbers but continue to meet customer requests. This is all relevant, even with the plans to redevelop the countryside centre into a larger purpose-built cafe as it will be at least 2023 before the building work is completed.

Events

The café supervisor formerly took responsibility for events in November and has certainly made a positive impact. In December there was Santa's Grotto and Breakfast / Hot chocolate with Santa events.

Over the 4 days of the grotto some 468 children attended including 2 specific sessions for children with additional needs. It takes a significant amount of work to build the grotto and set the scene, so in 2020 we will host the grotto every weekend in December extending the number of sessions. There will also be an evening for just adults with mulled wine and choirs singing and an evening for babies under 12 months who only need the photo opportunity.

New Year's Eve party was fully subscribed and well received by everyone as a family event - people have already tried to book for 2020!

These December events saw a profit of £7,000.

Looking ahead, Ranger led guided walks, Easter activities, a Robin Hood event in June, Emergency Services Day in July and a Food and Drink festival in September are all being organised together with a Mothering Day lunch and Big Sunday Brunch on Father's Day.

HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK 2018/19 OUTTURN AND 2019/20 BUDGET AND FORECAST

	2018/19 Outturn			2019/20 Forecast		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Forecast	Variance
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Hinchingbrooke Country Park and Management						
Staff	102	70	-32	102	102	0
Running Costs	23	65	42	23	33	10
Income	-47	-32	15	-47	-25	22
Total	78	103	25	78	110	32
Countryside Centre						
Staff	45	33	-12	35	38	3
Running Costs	18	16	-2	18	11	-7
Income	-41	-41	0	-41	-57	-16
Total	22	8	-14	12	-8	-20
Café						
Staff	58	74	16	38	66	28
Running Costs	65	64	-1	65	71	6
Income	-155	-160	-5	-155	-162	-7
Total	-32	-22	10	-52	-25	27
Total Hinchingbrooke Country Park	68	89	21	38	77	39

Comments on Variances

2018/19

There was a £32k saving in staff costs for the HCP and Management cost centre, this is because the vacant senior ranger post was not filled until the end of the financial year. The increase of £42k in running costs, relates to consultancy fees for the HCP/Paxton Pits business case (one off cost). There was a reduction in income, this was due to S106 projects (commuted sums) coming to the end of their life.

There was a saving of £14k for the countryside centre; this mainly relates to the vacant hospitality supervisor post.

The café was overspent by £10k, majority of this relates to an overspend of £16k on café assistants.

2019/20

The forecasted overspend on HCP and Management is due the reduction in income from S106 projects (commuted sums) coming to the end of their life.

The forecasted underspend of £20k for the countryside centre mainly relates to increased income from New Year's Eve and the Christmas Grotto; plus, the hiring out of rooms.

The café is currently forecasting to be overspent by £30k. The 2 main factors are a forecasted overspend of £28k on café assistants over the course year. A forecasted increase of £7k in the café's food and drink sales partially offset by an increase in catering supplies costs of £6k.