

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held in the Countryside Centre, Hinchingsbrooke Country Park, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, PE29 6DB on Friday, 14 October 2022

PRESENT: Councillors M L Beuttell, C Lowe, D L Mickelburgh and S L Taylor.

1 ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED

that Councillor M L Beuttell be elected Chair of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

Councillor M L Beuttell in the Chair.

2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 18th March 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED

that Councillor C A Lowe be appointed Vice-Chair of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

5 MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

To note the membership of the Group for 2022/23 as follows:

(a) Cambridgeshire County Council

Councillor K Billington.

(b) Huntingdonshire District Council

Councillors Mrs M L Beuttell, C A Lowe, D L Mickelburgh and S L Taylor.

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) and a PowerPoint presentation

on park activities for the period March to October 2022. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing and Volunteers

It was reported that the Assistant Ranger had been successfully recruited to a position elsewhere within the Council with a replacement Assistant Ranger in post since mid-September. Members were encouraged to note that one Kickstarter had started as an Apprentice Ranger at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve and that a new full time Café Team Leader had also been appointed.

In terms of volunteers, it was reported that work parties were at full strength and that this group of volunteers had been pivotal in the delivery of new signage at the Country Park. Cambridge Regional College's Green Team continued to deliver projects with work underway to create the Santa's Grotto for this year's event.

Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Management

The Group noted the completion of the first phase of the installation of new fishing platforms supplied by the Environment Agency and Brampton Angling Society. Over the dry summer months, strimming and grass cutting activities had been undertaken (though less than usual due to the extremely dry weather) as well as the removal of reeds in The Wash as part of the maintenance work required for open water whilst maintaining and managing wildlife habitats.

Looking forward, it was reported that tree planting work would continue to be undertaken by the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park replacing those that had died in the drought and to improve diversity in the glades and coppice plots as well as planting more mature trees to provide shade in areas used for picnicking.

Additionally, it was reported that the Country Park were currently trialling the use of duck nest boxes.

Community Groups

Members were pleased to note the Segway events that were currently taking place at the Country Park with 320 individuals booked this coming weekend. The Canoe Club and BRJ Club had funded the steps up to the new sailing facilities and a new joint venture with Cambridgeshire County Council and Grafham Water was currently being pursued to provide boating and wild swimming in the Main Lake over the summer holidays and weekends in 2023. In terms of the latter, a brief discussion was held on the current "No Swimming" policy and the recent national guidance which advises to "Swim Safely". Some work will initially be required to review the Council's policy and signage if the Council were to adopt the national position. In response to questions it was confirmed that events organised by a group would be required to take their own water samples.

Satellite Sites

A fire had broken out at Spring Common over the summer but the cause of it was yet to be identified. Litter picking across all sites remains a very time consuming task and can only be negated through educating the population.

In respect of Stukeley Meadows, an agreement has been reached with the Grounds Maintenance Team to undertake work in this area in exchange for some survey work to be undertaken by the Countryside Team.

Countryside Centre

Attention was drawn to occupancy levels and the number of bookings taken at the Countryside Centre compared to previous financial years. Whilst the number of users to date was down for 2022/23 compared to 2021/22, satisfactory income levels had been achieved thus far.

In response to a question raised by Councillor C A Lowe, it was confirmed that all twigs and branches from fruit trees were used to heat the Countryside Centre. Nevertheless the Countryside Manager noted the suggestion to sell this produce on to BBQ and outdoor groups for smoking purposes. It was also confirmed that the number of school visits had continued to decline since the COVID pandemic.

Income generated from car parking at the site was expected to be reinvested back into the Country Park from 2024 onwards. It is envisaged 8 electric vehicle charging points will be incorporated within the plans and it was further reported that a new parking tariff had also been agreed by the Cabinet. The Assistant Director (Recovery) undertook to circulate the report that went before the Cabinet to Members outside of the meeting. In discussing electric vehicle charging further, it was reported that options would be reviewed at tender stage in December/January.

(At this point during the meeting, at 10:40am, Councillor C Lowe left the meeting).

Having queried public access to toilets, the Countryside Manager reported that the facilities only were available when a Ranger was on site. Previously the facilities had been subjected to vandalism, graffiti and drug-use which was costly for the Council to maintain. It was however noted that some thought would be given to greater access to toilet facilities as part of the redevelopment project.

Café

It was noted that a new Lavazza coffee machine had been installed in the Café. Furthermore, the Café had extended its offerings to include Doggy Ice Cream, to target the dog walking community, who were largely the Country Park's main users over the winter months. Hot meals have been reintroduced as a trial and so far have been positively received. It is hoped to gradually reintroduce more choice but maintaining consistency and quality is key to success.

Events, Activities and Promotions

The Group's attention was drawn to the number of upcoming events planned at the Country Park until the end of the calendar year. Specific mention was made

of the Halloween, Santa's Grotto, Santa Paws and New Year's Eve party events. Of the 670 tickets available for the Grotto, 230 had been sold to date.

Future Development

Members attention was drawn to the pop up banners on display around the room and the new branding that would be associated with the Country Park going forward. The pop up banners would relocate to Pathfinder House in due course. The first phase of the redevelopment programme (play provision) was now complete. The Group were encouraged to note the positive feedback received thus far, which included a quote from a parent of a disabled child who had stated that the proposals would be "Life changing for us".

Financial Position

Members' attention was drawn to the outturn position of the Park for the 2021/22 financial year and the forecast outturn position for the 2022/23 financial year. The Park had generated better returns than expected in 2021/22. The Countryside Manager was continuing to manage the Countryside Centre and only 5 week days remained available for booking in the month of November. Hot food was now offered as an option in the Café where it was noted that the service would continue to adapt as demands changed.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was agreed that the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group would now meet on three occasions per year in April, July and November to receive updates on the redevelopment proposals. Dates will be confirmed with the Joint Group outside of the meeting.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Countryside Manager and the Assistant Director (Recovery) sought feedback from the Joint Group on the proposed redevelopment plans.

Chairman