

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 our 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