

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held at the Countryside Centre, Hinchingbrooke Country Park, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, PE29 6DB on Thursday, 21 October 2021

PRESENT: Councillors T D Sanderson, Mrs M L Beuttell and R J West.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors K Billington and Mrs S R Wilson.

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

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

Councillor R J West in the Chair.

In his introductory remarks, the Chairman welcomed the news that Huntingdonshire's Parks had been awarded Green Flag Status once again. Councillors Mrs M L Beuttell and T D Sanderson echoed the views of the Chairman and commended the staff and volunteers for their hard work over the last 18 months. The Chairman also wished to place on record the Group's thanks to County Councillor Mrs A Costello for her contributions to the Group in previous years.

2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12th March 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

4 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor Mrs M L Beuttell be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Hinchingbrooke Country Park Joint Group for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

5 MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

To note the membership of the Group for 2021/22 as follows:

(a) Cambridgeshire County Council

Councillor K Billington.

(b) Huntingdonshire District Council

Councillors Mrs M L Beuttell, 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) and a PowerPoint presentation on park activities for the period March to September 2021. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing and Volunteers

Members were encouraged to note that 2 young people had been assisting the Service under the Kickstart Scheme. It was further reported that a work experience student had been recruited 2 days a week to assist with bookings for the Countryside Centre.

Work parties were now at full strength with some of the SEN volunteers having returned back to the Country Park.

Hinchingbrooke Country Park Management

The Group were encouraged to note the range of work undertaken at the Country Park since the last meeting and noted the work to be undertaken over the coming months which included the cutting of wild-flower meadows and creation of habitat piles, completion of the new fishing platforms on the main lake, commencement of winter tree works in the new plantation, Bob's Wood and Hazel Triangle, the laying of part of the hedge around the Christie Drive balancing pond and the planting of more wetland trees around the main lake.

Following questions which were raised around the antisocial behaviour of a small number of young people causing issues and damage over recent months, it was reported that the matter had been reported to the Police and that social media was being utilised to generate awareness of the problems with a view to encouraging individuals to help identify the perpetrators. The Countryside Manager was hopeful that the issues would slowly come to an end in the near future. It was further confirmed that the site currently did not have any active CCTV cameras but these would be included as part of the future development plans for the Country Park.

Community Groups

Members were encouraged to note the increase in the number of health activities being undertaken on site, which included fitness classes for the community, Happy Mamas, Everyone Health nutrition and exercise sessions and Zig Zag runners. Early negotiations are occurring with Love to Swim with a view to increasing the number of open water sessions from Spring 2022.

Satellite Sites

An update was delivered on the range of work being undertaken across Views Common, Stukeley Meadows and Spring Common all of which had experienced increased footfall and littering.

Following a question raised by Councillor T D Sanderson, the Countryside Manager reported that discussions were ongoing in respect of the dispute over ownership with Highways England to identify responsibility for the maintenance of Views Common. The Countryside Manager then went on to report that in conjunction with a local volunteer who is focusing on litter picking, vegetation had been cleared under the underpass in this area.

Countryside Centre

Attention was drawn to occupancy levels and the number of bookings taken at the Countryside Centre compared to previous financial years. The figures showed a marked improvement when compared to 2020/21 with projected total income of £17,000 expected at the end of 2021/22 subject to no further lockdowns. It was encouraging to note that users of the Centre were able to continue hiring rooms with appropriate social distancing measures in place.

Café

The successful implementation of the "Grab & Go" system remains popular, helping to reduce queues and enabling the Café to become more cost effective by operating with reduced staff. The gift shop has proved popular providing local amateur crafters with an opportunity to sell their wares. Footfall at the Café remains high and income generated over Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 is on par with pre-COVID levels.

Events, Activities and Promotions

Events had been arranged in accordance with COVID guidelines which included the outdoor cinema, Robin Hood interactive trail, Den Building competition, Halloween interactive trail, Santa's Grotto and New Year Eve's Party. The outdoor cinema had not proved popular this year and resulted in a loss of £964. Poor weather had attributed to this together with the fact that indoor cinemas and public houses were now open for business.

Future Development

COVID-19 had resulted in delays with the investment programme. The Group noted the difficulties experienced with the supply of timber which had impacted upon the installation of the play equipment, originally scheduled in Autumn 2021, to Spring 2022.

Having had their attention drawn to the key elements of the development proposals and the estimated completion dates for each, it was noted that all scheduled works were due to be completed by Summer 2023. Despite the absence of physical work commencing, the Countryside Manager reported that work was ongoing behind the scenes which included the appointment of NCS

property consultants and a Project Support Officer and the undertaking of a number of site visits by various individuals including the landscape architect, engineers, planning consultants, service consultants and surveyors.

Councillor T D Sanderson drew the Countryside Manager's attention to potential funding available via the County Council. Matters that were further discussed included whether the existing play equipment would be replaced, the establishment of four new children's play zones on site and the positive relationship which existed amongst partners in respect of the scheme.

Financial Position

Members' attention was drawn to the outturn position of the Park for the 2020/21 financial year and the forecast outturn position for the 2021/22 financial year. In respect of the latter, it was reported that an underspend on Park Management was expected owing to increased sales of souvenirs and that Café income was expected to reach pre-COVID levels which was encouraging to note. Finally, the Group noted the underspend at the Countryside Centre owing to savings arising from the vacant post of Countryside Assistant together with a reduction in building maintenance and site works.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group would be held on 18th March 2022 at 10:00am.

Chairman