

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held in Countryside Centre, Hinchingbrooke Country Park, Brampton Road, Huntingdon, PE29 6DB on Friday, 21 July 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor M L Beuttell – Chair.
Councillors Billington, C Lowe and S L Taylor.

APOLOGIES: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor D J Shaw.

12. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21st April 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

13. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

14. 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 April to June 2023. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing & Volunteers

The Group heard that staffing had remained unchanged for the period and noted the hard work of the staff. Volunteers continued to play an important part with work parties proving especially useful for project work.

General Park Management

It was noted that grass growth had been substantial over the season due to the warm wet weather. Wildlife surveys were being undertaken over the summer months whilst maintenance on habitats was reduced to minimise disruption to wildlife. Maintenance continues throughout the park however in areas of high traffic such as pathways, maintaining potholes and repairing fences.

Looking forward

A new tractor had been procured and meadow cutting was underway. The warden informed the Group that the cut grass was then either

made into hay bales which were sold or composted to provide habitats for snakes and fungi around the park.

Work was underway to repair the damaged café roof. The sails which provide an awning cover during hotter periods are taken down in windy weather so as not to cause damage.

There has been a high level of interest from community groups to use facilities across the Park. Canoeing sessions on the main lake area were of particular note.

Negotiations were underway to provide a dog wash on the main park site. This would be operated by an external supplier but a ground rent would be paid to the park.

Satellite sites

A survey had confirmed that the number of bee orchids at Spring Common had been maintained which was positive.

Café and Hospitality

The coffee machines have been a popular introduction to the café. Quarter 1 had seen an increased income of £20,000 for the café. Hot meals have been reintroduced and different options are being trialled to see which are the most viable.

The food trailer works have been completed and this is now ready to be utilised over the summer, it's portable nature ensures that it can be used in high traffic areas.

Events

Christmas events are being planned with a suggestion that a Christmas Eve dinner will be hosted for individuals to enjoy the festive season. The interactive trails proved very popular at Easter and were hosted entirely by volunteers. Indoor car boot sales have been trialled and appear to work better in the winter months.

The Countryside Centre has benefitted from repeat bookings and big events.

Investment project

Planning for the project has now been submitted, with the tender process being planned for Autumn to ensure accurate costings once work is able to go ahead with construction planned for 2024. A flexible approach will be taken to construction as it is anticipated that multiple contractors will be on site so flexibility will ensure best use of time and resources.

There were some notable changes to the plans, with a standard width to the access road and safety zones being included. The lighting planned for the top car park would be mindful of the bat flight line as well as balancing brightness to minimise the effect on local wildlife. EV charging would be considered alongside implementation of air source heating in the centre. These two considerations would have

long term benefits for the environment as well as a beneficial impact on budgets.

Cllr Billington queried if the use of wind power had been considered for the site and the Group heard that due to the situation of the site which is sheltered by trees it would not be practical or efficient.

Finance

The Group heard that there was a general increase in running costs due to national inflation but income generated had increased alongside a long term vacancy which had helped to balance the budget. The Group heard that the vacancy would be filled once the investment project had been completed. It was further noted that staffing costs in the café had increased following a shift from casual staff to permanent staff however this provided better resilience and continuity for the team.

The Group heard that a communication plan was in place to ensure visibility and engagement with stakeholders once the planning application had been submitted.

15. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Group was amended and will now be held on 24th November 2023 at 10am.

Chair