

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: HEAD RANGER'S REPORT

Meeting/Date: Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group
17th April 2026

Executive Portfolio: Executive Member Cllr Julie Kerr

Report by: Ranger Sam James, Parks & Countryside Development
Coordinator Kirsty Drew and Commercial Manager
April Wright

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

This report summarises the autumn and spring months, the progress and issues over the period and provides a summary of the future months.

Recommendation:

The Group is asked to review and comment upon the report and note the progress made to date.

HEAD RANGER'S REPORT – OCTOBER 2025 TO APRIL 2026

1.1 STAFFING

- Two Rangers and one Assistant Ranger are based at Hinchingsbrooke.
- The Head Ranger position is being covered by the Parks & Countryside Biodiversity Manager while staffing is under review.
- One Weekend Warden continues to work at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. All Rangers and the Biodiversity Manager are working weekends as part of a rota to help fill the gaps and to ensure that both these sites remain staffed at weekends.
- Work-parties are run regularly with volunteers to support contracted staff.
- The cafe is being supported by a member of staff from One Leisure and the Visitor Experience Manager (Scott Fagg).
- Apprenticeships: Two Rangers across the Parks and Countryside team completed their apprenticeships with Bishops Burton University and received their degrees in Countryside Management (Countryside Ranger specific). Sam James, based at HCP, achieved the only distinction ever achieved in the courses history! This success has allowed HDC to secure funds for two more apprenticeships with Sam Dobson, another HCP Ranger now taking on the challenge over the next three years.

1.2 VOLUNTEERS

- Work parties continue to run at capacity, showing weekly numbers in excess of 60 volunteers. This shows a small rise in numbers over recent years and has allowed for such a high output of works across the site.
- SEN volunteer numbers are consistent and though an important partnership with Huntingdon Regional College, these volunteers gain qualifications through their work.
- The Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park continue to raise the profile of the Friends and support the park.

1.3 HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK MANAGEMENT

Habitat Management

The wintertime is when much of the habitat management work is carried out and the Ranger team were pleased to be able to deliver all of the planned management plan actions by the deadline of March 1st. This has included;

- Completing the scheduled works on the felling plan, namely the felling of a copse in the New Plantation to produce firewood and create a natural habitat in place of a man made one.
- Planting a range of native tree species, around 200 trees planted this winter including a few Black Poplar (*Populus nigra*) and Wild Service (*Sorbus torminalis*), two very rare species.
- Tree inspections and safety work, to maintain the largest HDC woodland asset.

- The pruning of the Orchard, to encourage good fruiting production.
- Cutting back hedgerows and scrub to encourage tight nit branches, perfect for nesting songbirds.
- Management of reed beds to keep open water and allow feeding grounds for birds and invertebrates.

Due to the flooding and heavy, continued rain and primed development, some tasks have been a real challenge for the team and some works have been rescheduled for the following autumn and winter. Namely the coppicing of willow and hazel species around the park and the lake edge. This will ensure us to reduce risk to staff and volunteers, while working away from high water as well as giving us a larger quantity of materials, allowing us to assist the development of many new hedgerows around the coming development.

Visitor infrastructure improvements

In addition to the habitat management work, the Ranger team have also been improving the infrastructure for visitors. Old fencing around some of our pedestrian entrances has been replaced with a more "countryside" style, making them more inviting and safer. Many natural, woven fences and hedges have been installed to guide visitors away from sensitive areas. As seen in the commercial report, Rangers have also installed 100m of new footpath, giving visitors a more accessible route from the car park, down to the main field.

Operations Yard

Due to changes at Eastfield House and the planned delivery of the food waste service, there was a need for some of the operations to find a new home. Working alongside our Arb and Grounds teams, The Rangers have helped to prepare for the installation of an Ops Yard at HCP, alongside the Rangers Yard. Care is being taken to supply sufficient screening around this area, with large natural panels planned to be installed to give security and limit any changes to the current feel of the Park.

This work allows both services to work more collaboratively and better share assets and equipment between the teams. As well as allowing faster response to any fallen trees, this is more cost-effective use of HDC staff time to manage our huge woodland stock on site. With the expert knowledge of our Ranger team now working closer with the high level of delivery in our Arb team, this should show a real benefit to the woodland habitats around the site and the wider district.

Looking forward

With the announcement of the start of the site development work, plans are in place to deliver additional footpaths and access to the park. A new temporary fenced area will allow activities and the Forest School to continue, access to the hospitality area in the car park will be opened to enable business to continue. With the development comes many improvements to our Biodiversity and works are already underway to start planning and delivering the minimum increase of a ten percent uplift across the site.

Looking ahead there will be the meadow management work and the hay harvest across the sites.

1.4 COMMERCIAL TEAM UPDATE

Easter 'Eggventure in the Park'

A sell out event with 400 children bringing their families down to HCP to take part in a magical adventure, involving a charming large format wooden egg trail, activity burrow inclusive of archery, delivered by the wonderful Active Lifestyles Team, a cornhole game, and a sensory dig for carrots, completed with a small, but very cute chocolate Lindt bunny. Supported by the 'Green Team' of CRC who used their creativity and imagination to help the team deliver the wonderful event resources and joined by redolence (third party coffee and speciality tea) in the burrow. The event was a hit! It was also an important milestone for our newly recruited Events Development Manager, Juliette, as it was her first live event for HDC. The event was professionally run, and took account of dietary and accessibility requirements, and allowed us to trial operations without any built infrastructure, it was all led independently outside, to enable the team to truly test how events delivery could look throughout construction and across the district, and thankfully the weather was kind! We have had some fantastic feedback from residents so far, and the team have also delivered a post-event survey to glean more insights to assist with future development of the district-wide event programme.

Appointment of Lindum Contractors

Lindum have been appointed to deliver the HCP Redevelopment Project, and will be starting on site on the 13th April. The Site manager has already visited site to begin getting to know the team and is presenting as an incredibly safe pair of hands. The first newsletter has been shared with those stakeholders on the park, outlining a headline timeline, and important information about how the project will progress and any potential impacts that may present. We plan to share updates with residents via the HDC website, and via a wooden notice board in our temporary visitor hub.

Move to Temporary Visitor Hub

The café team aim to have moved into the temporary visitor hub on the 13th April to line up with construction starting on site. Our temporary visitor hub will consist of female, male and accessible toilets and 'The Nestbox', our food and beverage kiosk. The team will be there to reassure visitors as they arrive to site, provide direction as to safe visitor journeys around the park, such as new pathways that the rangers have created in the Bobs Wood, to provide an alternative and accessible route for families to incremental play areas around the park. We will provide updates about the progress of the build and any impact for visitors, via a wooden notice board in the car park. Over the past few months, the café team, and our Visitor Experience Manager, Scott, have been working extremely hard to switch our offer to entirely 'Grab and Go', testing and trialling new menu items, while keeping some favourites, such as the beloved doggy sausages - visitors seem receptive to the incremental changes we have been making to the menu. We have elevated our coffee offering, and the team will be

able to serve a wider range of hot beverages thanks to some new machines.

Commercial Sustainability Plan

A decision was taken at cabinet to approve the Parks and Open Spaces Commercial Sustainability Plan. The report that was presented set out our overall direction of travel as recommended by T3 Creative, industry expert consultants. It also outlined our approach for phase one of our capital investment programme, which will see us delivering largescale investment across the district at five of our parks and open spaces, including further investment at Hinchingsbrooke Country park - providing an enhanced experience for our residents, enabling us to diversify and grow our audiences, and delivering £700,000 of additional revenue in to the service per annum, ensuring the longevity of this non – statutory, but very much valued service.

Multi- Use of the Main Lake at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park

While the lake has seen some good use previously with the local canoe club, open water swimming groups and our partnership with Grafham Water to deliver a ‘pay and play’ water sports activities each summer, an opportunity has presented to enhance the use of this space and see more residents getting the opportunity to experience the park from the water. It has long been documented that green spaces reduce stress levels and are good for overall well-being, but the evidence suggests that accessing blue space may have more significant impact and has additional benefits such as swimming and unique soundscapes. As such, we plan to split the lake into three thirds, giving over one third for our regular activity users, another reserved as a home for our much loved wildlife, with further enhancements planned, such as a tern -raft, and the final third to deliver a new and exciting inflatable experience, and water sports throughout the Summer Season. We have recently conducted an Ecological Impact Assessment, and water quality testing to ensure safety for our residents and protection of the wildlife that call this lake home, and so far our preliminary checks are indicating that this could very much be a reality. We are hopeful to be able to open the Aqua Park in the Summer of 2026.

1.5 COMMUNITY GROUPS

Established groups are all operating well, including weekly Parkrun and monthly Zigzag runners, open water swimmers, mountain bike training, and Huntingdon Canoe Club. Fireflies Forest School continues to offer a variety of sessions during term time and in the school holidays.

1.6 CAFÉ

	2023/24 Outturn			2024/25 Outturn			2025/26 Provisional Outturn		
	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Actual	Variance	Budget	Forecast	Variance
Staff	65	114	17	163	141	-22	179	143	-36
Running Costs	90	131	41	123	161	38	113	141	28
Income	-175	-238	-45	-191	-296	-105	-218	-314	-96
Total	-20	7	13	95	6	-89	74	-30	-104

Compared to the 2024/25 out-turn, the café at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park has delivered another strong year for income generation, exceeding

its income target by over £18k year to date, provisional outturn is expected to be £96k better than budget due to the opening of a temporary café when the development at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park starts. This has resulted in an overall out-turn of £104k surplus, significantly better than the £74k budget deficit.

1.7 EVENTS, ACTIVITIES and PROMOTIONS

November 2025 – April 2026

Phoenix Running	Sunday 2 nd November 2025
Secondary Schools Annual District Cross Country	Wednesday 12 th November 2025
CCC Nature Play Training	Monday 23 rd February, Tuesday 3 rd March, Thursday 5 th March 2026
Eggventure in the Park	Wednesday 1 st to Saturday 4 th April 2026
Back to Wilderness (axe & knife throwing)	Saturday 4 th April 2026

1.8 COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

- No bookings have been taken since September in readiness for the expected development works.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/25	2025/26 to date
Bookings	412	42	124	199	118	104	32
Users	12931	1033	3473	6160	3559	4173	
Income	£31,590	£4,572	£14,150	£28,721	£26,500	£35,413.80	£15,898