

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RECORD OF DECISION OF THE COBTREE MANOR ESTATE CHARITY COMMITTEE**

Decision Made: 22 December 2014

#### **THE FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF COBTREE MANOR PARK AND THE VISITOR CENTRE/CAFE**

##### **Issue for Decision**

To consider (a) the options for the future management of Cobtree Manor Park and the Visitor Centre/Café and (b) the implementation of measures to ensure a more financially sustainable future for the Park and associated facilities.

##### **Decision Made**

1. That agreement be given to the creation of the new posts of Cobtree Manager, Visitor Centre/Café Supervisor and Visitor Centre/Café Assistant in accordance with the required skills set out in exempt Appendix A to the report of the Cobtree Officer.
2. That agreement be given to the employment of casual staff or volunteers to work at the Visitor Centre/Café as and when demand requires it.
3. That agreement be given to Cobtree Manor Park, including the Visitor Centre/Café and the car park, being managed by Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) in accordance with the proposal set out in exempt Appendix A to the report of the Cobtree Officer for an initial period of five years subject to annual review by the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity Committee with an option to terminate on the part of the Charity if the conditions of the contract are not being met.
4. That detailed financial projections be submitted to a meeting of the Committee early in the New Year.
5. That agreement be given to the surplus funds generated by the Visitor Centre/Café and the car park being utilised towards the future maintenance of the Cobtree Manor Estate with initial emphasis on the actual Park itself.
6. That agreement be given in principle to the introduction of car parking charges at Cobtree Manor Park on the basis that a more detailed report dealing with the proposed charges and the method of operating the car park will be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

7. That the Head of Legal Partnership be authorised to prepare and enter into contracts giving effect to the decisions set out above.

## **Reasons for Decision**

### Cobtree Manager

Since Kent Life has come back under the direct management of the Council acting as the Corporate Trustee of the Charity known as the Cobtree Manor Estate (CMET) and the Cobtree Manor Park project has got underway the amount of work falling to Officers has increased greatly to a level which is now unsustainable. The additional post of Cobtree Manager will ensure that enquiries relating to the Estate are dealt with quickly and efficiently and reduce the impact the Estate changes have had on MBC Officer time, whilst ensuring a more efficient and prompt service for visitors to the Estate and other stakeholders such as those operating Kent Life and the Golf Course.

The Cobtree Manager will undertake the day to day management and monitoring of the Estate, overseeing Cobtree Manor Park but also monitoring the Golf Course contract and the Kent Life management agreement. Senior MBC Officers will still undertake the strategic management of the Estate and the Cobtree Officer will continue to work on behalf of the Committee to ensure the management of the Estate continues to operate in the best interests of the Charity.

The addition of a Cobtree Manager to the Estate structure will ensure a better service for CMET and the general public and stakeholders in the Estate. It will provide one point of contact for Estate enquiries. At present this work is covered by a number of different Officers and is taking much more time than a few years ago. The opening of the new Visitor Centre will only increase this workload. This new post will ensure that the service offered to visitors to the Park is not adversely affected.

The Cobtree Manager will also have a key responsibility for ensuring the Park generates sufficient income to achieve agreed income targets. The role will also focus on the Visitor Centre/Café, car parking, events programme and in sourcing match funding for Estate projects. This is a vital role for moving towards a more financially sustainable management model for the Park.

It is anticipated that some of the costs of employing a Cobtree Manager will be offset by the reduced MBC Officer time which would have to be recharged to the Charity.

### Car Parking

After a report on the introduction of car parking charges was brought to the Committee in November 2013 it was agreed that this issue should be brought back before the Committee for a final decision prior to the opening of the new Visitor Centre.

The improvements at Cobtree Manor Park have been highly successful and have led to a massive increase in visitor numbers from an estimate of

40,000 per annum prior to Park improvements up to an approximate annual figure of 280,000 visitors per year. On busy days over 840 cars are recorded per day. Car park capacity in the available space has been maximised with 150 spaces in the main car park and approximately 50 in the overflow. On a busy day the car park runs at full capacity, with cars sometimes parking on the main road. Demand for parking can exceed the supply on occasion and a car parking charge could help to reduce this demand.

Notices will be displayed in the Park to the effect that all funds generated will be returned to the Charity to be spent on the Park and will be put towards the running and upkeep of facilities ensuring that the equipment can be maintained and kept in a good condition for future users.

The Park needs to aim to significantly reduce the subsidy it requires from the wider Estate. Currently it is reliant on revenue from the Golf Course and it has run this year at a deficit, with more expenditure than the income the Golf Course has produced. Increasing visitor numbers have meant that the costs of running the Park have increased greatly due to increased wear and tear, the need to have many more litter collections and additional staff and the need to staff the Park for longer and outside normal working hours.

The uncertainty of future income from the Golf Course due to the re-tender of the facility over the long term means alternative and additional income sources should be sought. Aside from this point, it is in the best interests of the Charity to widen and maximise sources of revenue; such revenue can then be applied towards the future maintenance, and indeed the improvement of the Park.

As an example, a nominal car parking rate of £1 per day at present visitor levels would make around £140,000 per year. This would be reduced by season tickets and there might also be a reduction in use of the car park. However it is likely that this level of income will still be enough to cover the new staffing costs and some of the maintenance costs of the Park.

A more detailed report on the introduction of car parking charges, the actual charges to be levied and the method of operating the car park will be submitted to the Committee in the New Year.

There is a bus stop immediately outside the entrance to the Park and the footpath from the River Medway finishes almost opposite providing alternative means of access for those visitors not wanting to travel by car.

#### Visitor Centre/Café

It is now proposed that the Visitor Centre/Café is run for an agreed management fee by Maidstone Borough Council and for an initial five year period subject to annual review by the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity Committee with an option to terminate on the part of the Charity if the conditions of the contract are not being met. By having the facility run by the Council in the same way as the rest of the Park is currently run, the whole staff team will be able to work as one unit cutting down the need for the Park staff to do longer hours and additional staff to be employed.

For example Café staff who are on an early shift could litter pick, open the gates and check the play ground prior to it being used enabling Park staff to come in later and lock the Visitor Centre after Café staff have left.

A five year contract, rather than the two year contract originally proposed, is considered to be in the best interests of the Charity as it will enable the new arrangements to become established whilst maintaining appropriate checks and balances in favour of the Charity.

The Council proposal will provide an improved service for visitors and the cost to CMET will be reduced from current levels by offsetting future income from the car park and Visitor Centre against MBC Officer charges. By MBC working to an agreed management fee any risk to the Charity is reduced. In addition the Council, as Corporate Trustee, is legally obliged to protect CMET with a financial indemnity in the event of losses attributable to its management of the Park (including the Visitor Centre and the car park). It is unlikely a third party commercial operator can, or would, offer such an unconditional indemnity to CMET.

The present Café operation has required a security service for the locking/unlocking of the Park due to the operator not being involved with the gates. With more staff working within the Park team this could be done by staff and would save the Charity £1,000 per month.

The high visitor numbers and opportunity to bring in income from the Visitor Centre/Café and car park should significantly reduce the subsidy the Park requires making it considerably less reliant on income from the Golf Course. The new Cobtree Manager will be required to look at developing more income streams to work towards the Park becoming self sufficient in income measured against expenditure. In the event that a future surplus is made the money made by CMET will be reinvested in the Park.

Working towards the Park becoming self sufficient reduces the biggest risk at present, namely that the uncertainty in Golf Course income poses a serious threat to the ability of the Charity to cover the maintenance costs of the Park. Secondly an increase in income will mean that cuts in service will not have to be made to ensure that next year the costs of the Park break even. These measures will ensure that there is funding to maintain the Park particularly as recent additions such as the play area have high maintenance costs.

Managing the Café within the Park staffing structure will enable the Café Supervisor and Ranger along with the Cobtree Manager to take on a Duty Manager role ensuring that there are staff in the Park who are able to deal with enquiries and incidents as they arise. It will also mean that Café staff can assist with the running of the Visitor Centre, as can Park staff if required. If an external caterer was used it is likely that additional charges would be incurred for this.

A review of existing staff roles will be undertaken to enable the new structure to be implemented. At present the existing staff are working regular hours. It is the intention that this is changed to a shift pattern to ensure that the peak hours and weekends are staffed. This will save

money as since the opening of the new play area additional staff have to come in on overtime to clear litter from the Park. In addition to the alteration of working hours there will be some minor alteration of roles to reflect the new management structure and the new tasks that are associated with this re-organisation.

## **Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected**

### Cobtree Manager

The Committee could have chosen not to appoint a new Cobtree Manager. This is not considered appropriate as the current workload for MBC Officers is unsustainable. As there is no way to reduce the workload given the new responsibilities for Kent Life and the increased volume of visitors to the Park, a manager dedicated to this Estate is considered the best option to deal with the increase, otherwise the Council would not be able to continue to provide the service that CMET has come to expect.

The Committee could have decided not to make any changes to the current way that the Estate is managed; however, if no changes are made there is a risk that there will be insufficient time dedicated to the management of the assets of the Estate so as to maximise income and maintain the offer for members of the general public.

The Committee could have chosen not to have the Cobtree Manager role as part of the Park structure. This is not considered appropriate as at present enquiries are dealt with inefficiently and take much more Officers' time than previously due to the increasing volume of work. If this were to continue the Borough Council would look to recharge this to CMET. By having a manager role the different functions across the Estate can be covered by one post and communications particularly with voluntary groups and tenants can be improved.

### Car Parking

The alternative action is not to introduce parking charges. This is not considered appropriate because the Charity has to find a way of enabling the Park to become less reliant on Golf Course income.

Continued high visitor use will put a strain on the Charity's resources if additional funding to assist with maintenance and the running of the Visitor Centre and Park is not identified. Charging for car parking will ensure that there is sufficient funding so that the maintenance needs resulting from increased use of the Park will be met in the future.

The car park even with the additional overflow is likely to be insufficient to cope with demand at the busiest periods. Charging is considered to be the best way to encourage people to come to Cobtree Manor Park by alternative means, thereby reducing the pressure on the car park.

### Visitor Centre/Cafe

The Committee could have chosen to have an external caterer operating the Visitor Centre/Café. This is not considered appropriate as it would also

result in additional staffing continuing to be needed in the Park to cover the peak hours and littering. The advantage of bringing all the staffing under CMET is that they can be used much more flexibly across the Visitor Centre and Park. It also enables the car parking function to be managed by the Visitor Centre staff saving CMET the cost of having an external operator to operate it. Bringing all the staff in house also results in a saving by not needing the security company who currently lock and unlock the Park. It is likely that an external contractor would charge a premium for these services.

Car parking operation and gate locking/unlocking could be done by separate contractors. This is not considered appropriate as it would be more expensive than having one operator (MBC) covering all these services.

The Committee could have chosen to run the Visitor Centre/Café but not take on the additional staff roles. This is not considered appropriate as the Café requires staff in addition to the Cobtree Manager to be operational, and the Cobtree Manager and MBC structure is the most advantageous way of encouraging volunteers to work at the Park for the benefit of the Charity and the general public using it.

### **Background Papers**

Cobtree Manor Park Master Plan

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Head of Policy and Communications by: <b>5 January 2015.</b>
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