

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 17 JANUARY
2012**

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Blackmore (Chairman)
Councillors Brindle, Field, FitzGerald (Vice-Chairman),
D Mortimer, Mrs Parvin, Paterson, Yates and Hinder

110. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.

It was resolved that all items be webcast.

111. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillor Mrs Stockell.

112. Notification of Substitute Members.

Councillor Brindle substituted for Councillor Mrs Stockell.

113. Notification of Visiting Members.

There were no Visiting Members.

114. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

Councillors FitzGerald and Mortimer disclosed an interest in item 9, Locality Boards – Written Update, by virtue of their position as nominated Members on the Locality Boards. Councillor Yates declared an interest in Item 8 of the agenda, Parks and Open Spaces, by virtue of his involvement with the Friends of Mote Park.

115. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

It was agreed that all items should be taken in public as proposed.

116. Minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2011 and 6 December 2011

It was resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 November and 6 December 2011 should be agreed as a correct record of the meeting and duly signed.

117. Parks and Open Spaces

The Chairman introduced Jason Taylor, Parks and Leisure Manager. Mr Taylor gave a presentation explaining the way in which services had been delivered by the Parks and Leisure team in the past, the financial restraints and the impact of budget decisions on the Parks and Open Spaces team and new ways of working to achieve value for money.

The Committee were informed that the borough's Parks and Open Spaces consisted of:

- 30 parks and open spaces;
- Green space types;
- 71 play area;
- 686 allotments; and
- 425 hectares total green space.

It was explained that the Parks and Leisure team consisted of a team of seven responsible for play areas, leisure centre, golf course, allotments, planning applications, trees, rivers, moorings, wildlife sites, sports and event bookings and Mote Park audience development. The Maintenance team known as Maidstone Borough Services were made up of the Parks Maintenance Team, a team of 14 who looked after Mote Park, Whatman Park, Cobtree, Clare Park, South Parks and Brenchley Gardens and a mobile team of 20 who looked after the rest of the borough.

It was explained that in the past there had been grounds maintenance contracts in place with rigid specifications. Two Monitoring Officers were employed to oversee the contact arrangements and ensure the work was being carried out as agreed in the contract. Mr Taylor explained that the result of this approach was that little ownership was taken and team were working for the contract rather than for the parks. Teams were static (except in Mote Park) and anything that was done in addition to the specifications of the contact was done so at an additional cost. Work had to be carried out even when it was not needed. For example grass was cut even if the weather had been dry and it did not need to be cut. If it was not done the contractor would be fined by Maidstone Borough Council. Tree Maintenance was cited as an example of an additional cost to the contract arrangements.

The Officer informed the Committee of the positive events of the past few years which included the adoption of the Green Space Strategy in 2005 and the successful Mote Park Lottery bid. He also highlighted the appointment of an additional Parks Technical role in September 2009 and the two Green Flag awarded parks (Clare Park and Whatman Park), the benchmark national standard for parks and open spaces.

In 2010 the Parks Management Plans were updated, individual Management Plans for thirty Parks and Open spaces which provided the following information on each park:

- The relationship to the Council's aims and objectives;
- Vision and objectives for the site;
- The site and its facilities;

- Management and maintenance;
- Forthcoming improvements;
- Funding; and
- Results of quality audits.

Mr Taylor explained the Parks and Leisure Team's budget. In addition to the main budget allocation there was a separate budget for the River Park and Cobtree Manor Park because the River Park was part of a lottery bid and Cobtree was run as a charity. The team had an income target of £87,150 and an extra budget of £81,100 which covered additional works and income short falls.

The Committee were informed that the team had achieved the following savings:

- Reduction in the team by 1.5 posts in 3 years;
- No monitoring officers – reduction on two posts;
- Tree Inspections carried out in house by Parks and Opens Spaces Officers who have undertaken training; and
- The Leisure Centre now made sports bookings on behalf of Maidstone Borough Council following the reduction of a post.

Indirect cuts that impacted on the team included:

- The loss of a pest control officer for Parks – funding had to come from the additional works budget;
- Loss of a dedicated Funding Officer at the Council meant that the team had to find and make bids for additional funding themselves; and
- The income target set in the budget strategy for Mote Park car parking charges which was not taken forward had to be absorbed by the team - £15,000 in 2011/12 and £30,000 in 2012/13.

Mr Taylor explained that the Parks and Leisure team was now an in house team and there was no longer a contract in place. The advantage of this was that the team could be more reactive and were also able to carry out additional work, described as a 'winter work list'. In order to make savings and achieve value for money Parks Technical Officers had trained as tree contractors and as a result no longer needed to pay an external contractor.

The work done in Benchley Gardens and the areas around All Saints and the Carriage Museum were described as a means of illustrating the current outlook of the Parks and Leisure team and what was currently being achieved with Parks and Open Spaces. Images showed an open and inviting Benchley Gardens as the result of high hedges being removed and hedges and shrubs cleared from around the Carriage Museum made it more visible and open. Members raised some concerns over the removal of vegetation and queried whether it would be replaced with like for like. The Officer explained that the area around the Carriage museum had been altered as it was creating a problem with Anti Social Behaviour but that this had been handled by experts.

Members were informed that Mote Park had approximately 1 million visits a year, comparable with the Hop Farm but was currently providing a minimum income. The employment of an Audience Development Officer as part of the Mote Park Improvement Project and Lottery bid had proved very successful and the income target set of £10,000 had already been exceeded by £8,000. This had been achieved through bringing in volunteers who undertook various projects and tasks that would otherwise be completed at a cost. This excluded 945 hours of volunteering work done by under 18s. The Audience Development Officer also organised events such as the recent stargazing event in partnership with the BBC.

Mr Taylor informed the Committee that the income of Mote Park could be comparable with London and Royal Parks in terms of events and that this was a research project underway at present within the team. The team visited other parks such as Regent's Park, talking to other professionals. It was highlighted that some events were not hugely profitable such as fairs but could still impact on the team's income targets set as part of the budget strategy.

With events it was established that there was a cost to clean up afterwards. Members suggested that those hiring a park should pay a deposit that could be retained if not cleared up satisfactorily. Mr Taylor explained that London Parks made a £3 surcharge per person to cover this.

The Committee considered the waste in Mote Park on a Monday left after weekend sports activities. The Officer explained that sports clubs would be known to them and they would go back to them. There were ways to address the problem though the Rugby and Football leagues and the responsibility would be with the home team. It was felt that the littering problem should be highlighted as part of the re launch of Mote Park. The Officer explained that it would be addressed but it should be handled carefully as it could be counterproductive in attracting visitors to the Park if images of a litter filled park were used as part of the advertising as was the initial suggestion.

The use of the Amphitheatre and how it was marketed was discussed. It was explained that this was part of the River Park and was marketed by the Hazlitt Theatre. Shakespeare would be moving to Mote Park and would be a free event. Members queried the lack of electricity at the Amphitheatre. It was explained that this had been reviewed and there were objectives to this now.

It was observed that with events there were various teams involved rather than one single team. The approach at present seemed disjointed and did not enable the Council to build on successes such as the Radio One Big Weekend. The success of the stargazing event which was held in partnership with the BBC and attracted more than 100 people was also noted. The Committee felt that the Borough Update could be utilised to promote events. The Officer explained that the Audience Development Officer was working on the programme of events for the next year and it

would be available the following month. Members felt that a focused Event Strategy was needed.

Mr Taylor felt that the temporary post of the Audience Development Officer could be extended as a self funding position focused on volunteering and events in all the boroughs parks. He highlighted the positive working relationship with partners such as the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership in delivering the Bio Diversity action Plan efficiently and effectively and partners providing services such as the water sports at Mote Park and several tennis clubs across the borough's parks. The Officer also felt that the Mote Park Cafe contract which was coming up could provide a new opportunity for the Park.

Questions were raised about professionals using the parks for business purposes. The Officer explained that for groups of more than six there was a fee and British Military Fitness used the Mote Park for training sessions with 20-30 people and were happy to pay. This fee did not apply to individual personal trainers

The Committee observed that despite a substantial budget the Parks and Leisure team were not able to address the sustainability of what was offered, they were still looking for investment and as such standing still. All maintenance issues from signs and fences to pathway repairs were to be paid for from the additional budget of £81,100 which was also needed to absorb any income shortfalls. The Officer explained that a business like approach was needed to deal with budget cuts and income target sets. He informed Members that the management plans were continually being reviewed and the tree management and maintenance policy were currently being re written. The management plans were described a living documents and the aspirations included had potential if development contributions were to come in the future. Trees were to be inspected every three years and a review of the River Park was due as it was now twelve years old. Members queried the responsibility of the main bridges that would impact on access to the River Park and were informed that they were maintained by Property. It was felt that an Asset Management Strategy was needed to assist the Parks and Leisure team going forward.

Members were informed that the recent Play Area Review had been undertaken and the scoring system used would inform the strategic direction taken. The results of this would come to the Committee to evaluate. It was explained that Play areas were looked at every two years and the scoring table was updated not the play areas themselves. The condition was scored as wither green, amber or red with the same standard applied across the borough. Members were concerned about dangerous equipment. The Officer explained that if it was not in a safe state it would be removed. High use areas were inspected on a daily basis. The Committee were keen to gain an understanding of the scoring system and asked to see sight of this.

Members questioned whether there would be more dog bins in parks; the Officer explained that team were already at capacity with the collection

from those already in place. It was explained that the problem was not with the bins it was the about the waste been picked up.

Members requested that the Officer's presentation to be shared with all Members.

It was recommended that:

- a) The Parks and Open Spaces Manager's presentation should be shared with all Members;
- b) The cost of maintaining all the main bridges impacting on the access to the River Park should be established;
- c) A focussed Events Strategy should be developed taking into account the current successes highlighted to the Committee such as the role of the Audience Development Officer, Volunteering and Events held at Mote Park;
- d) The Committee wish to see sight of the scoring system used in the Play Review;
- e) The Committee would like to keep a watching brief on the current events project being undertaken by a member of the Parks and Open Spaces team; and
- f) A review should be undertaken on the approach taken with sustainability and asset management in relation to Parks and Open Spaces and the Committee updated.

118. Locality Boards - Written Update

The Committee considered the written update on the locality board. Concerns were raised about cuts to youth services at a County level.

Members felt that a watching brief should be kept on the Locality Board as it was in its early stages and in particular the Council's input and relationship with 'ambition boards'.

It was resolved that the Locality board should be kept on the Committee's agenda.

119. Forward Plan and Scrutiny Officer Update

The Committee were informed that a Corporate Services and Communities Joint Overview and Scrutiny Meeting would be held on 7 February to consider the draft Parish Services Scheme.

The Committee considered its next review topic, Neighbourhood Action Planning. It was felt that representatives from pilot schemes should be invited along with an external organisation and Jim Boot, Community Development Manger. The Chairman invited Councillor FitzGerald to

recommend pilot groups involved in the Park Wood Neighbour Action Plan which would be the Committee's focus.

It was recommended that Jim Boot, Community Development Manger and Pilot Groups along with an external organisation involved in the pilot Neighbour Action Plan at Park Wood be invited to the next meeting.

120. Duration of Meeting

6.30 p.m. to 8.40 p.m.