

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COBTREE MANOR ESTATE CHARITY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18 MARCH 2020

Present: Councillor Mrs Gooch (in the Chair) and
Councillors Cox and English

67. MINUTE'S SILENCE

The Committee and the Officers in attendance observed a minute's silence in memory of Councillor Mrs Wendy Hinder, a Member of the Committee, who had passed away in February.

68. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from the Chairman (Councillor McLoughlin) and Councillor Daley.

In the absence of the Chairman, the Vice-Chairman took the Chair.

69. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor English was substituting for Councillor Daley.

70. URGENT ITEMS

The Chairman said that, in her opinion, the report of the Leisure Manager relating to the Forstal Field Funding Agreement should be taken as an urgent item to enable the deadline for applications for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to be met.

71. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

There were no Visiting Members.

72. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

73. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

74. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That the items on the agenda be taken in public as proposed.

75. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 JANUARY 2020

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed.

76. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

77. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

78. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

79. COBTREE MANOR ESTATE FINANCIAL POSITION

The Senior Finance Manager (Client) introduced his report summarising the financial position of the Cobtree Manor Estate as at 29 February 2020. The report covered the Golf Course, Kent Life, Cobtree Manor Park and residential properties. It also included an update on the Service Level Agreement.

Financial Position

The Senior Finance Manager (Client) advised the Committee that:

- The summary totals showed a positive variance of £48,396 at the end of February 2020. The budgeted forecast for the year was for an operational surplus of £55,920, compared to a surplus of £35,596 for 2018/19.
- There were no issues to report at this stage in respect of the Cobtree Golf Course, Kent Life and residential properties.
- In overall terms the budget for Cobtree Manor Park was showing an underspend, but there were some underlying issues. The new Apprentice post was still vacant, and would not be filled this financial year, resulting in an underspend on employee costs. There were some overspends on controlled running costs, but these additional costs had been offset by underspends in other areas such as repairs and maintenance. Car park income continued to be high and the profit share element of the Café contract had realised more income than was forecast. These two income streams together with the underspends on repairs and maintenance and employee costs meant that the overspends were covered.

Service Level Agreement

- The Senior Finance Manager (Client) reminded the Committee that Mid-Kent Legal Services had been asked to redraft the Service Level Agreement (SLA) to ensure that it accurately reflects the complex nature of the relationship between the Charity and the various Council departments. This was to ensure that the roles of the various Officers are clarified sufficiently to ensure that no conflicts of interest arise in their dealings with Charity matters. The aim had been to report the revised draft to this meeting of the Committee. However, due to other work commitments within Mid-Kent Legal Services, the document had not been finalised. It was now planned to report the SLA back to the Committee in July.

In response to questions, the Senior Finance Manager (Client) explained that Mytime, the Golf Course contractor, had been invoiced for the first three quarters of 2019/20 and the invoices had been paid. Planning Solutions, the operators of Kent Life, were invoiced twice a year (in October and April), and had paid the first invoice.

The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development drew the Committee's attention to the potential implications for the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 virus; for example, closure of income generating facilities.

RESOLVED:

1. That the financial position of the Cobtree Manor Estate as at 29 February 2020 be noted.
2. That the progress to date with the Service Level Agreement between the Borough Council and the Charity be noted.

80. COBTREE MANOR ESTATE UPDATE

The Leisure Manager introduced Mr Nigel Holman, the new Cobtree Park Manager, to the Committee.

The Leisure Manager then presented his report providing an update on activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate during the period 1 January to 29 February 2020. It was noted that:

Cobtree Manor Park

- The wet weather experienced recently had impacted on visitor numbers and car park income, but the February half-term holiday had been busy and numbers had been increasing in late February. Now, however, the spread of the COVID-19 virus was likely to have an impact on visitor numbers and income.

- The Cobtree Park Manager had submitted the Green Flag application for the Manor Park, but judging had been suspended due to the spread of the virus.
- The 2020-2030 management plan for the Manor Park was now in the final draft stage and there was an emphasis on sustainability, climate change and biodiversity. The final version of the management plan would be reported to the Committee for approval.
- Some key items of equipment were stolen when the Park Rangers' container was broken into during the half-term holiday. A report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee addressing alternative storage solutions. In the meantime the Park Rangers had relocated to the Elephant House building and off-site storage facilities were being used.
- The overflow car park area had not been used this year because of the weather. Investigation of the area had also identified significant root damage to the trees caused by continued car parking. The area was being rested for the time being pending the development of a plan that would balance the protection of the trees with the needs of Park users.
- Quotations had been sought for electronic Park gates which would provide greater flexibility for the Park Team and enable savings to be made in future years. Provision had been made in the current capital programme for security and the initial quotations indicated that the gates could be delivered within this budget. A report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Cobtree Manor Park Golf Course

- The wet weather had also impacted on the Golf Course. The number of rounds played was down on 2019 and the Course had to be closed for one week in January. Offers and pricing were being used to reduce the impact of the closure. The Golf Course development works had been put on hold as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Kent Life

- Kent Life had won a Red Rosette tourism award for its customer experience and customer service. The operators had completed their annual maintenance work in readiness for 2020. They had refurbished toilets and carried out remedial works on some of the buildings. The Museum was still open, but school visits had been cancelled due to COVID-19.

Residential Properties

- It had been identified that one of the residential properties might become vacant in the near future. A report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee setting out possible options in the

event of this or any other of the residential properties becoming vacant.

During the discussion on these items, it was suggested and agreed that:

- Consideration be given to the use of grasscrete paving in the overflow car park area at Cobtree Manor Park and that any new storage facility at the Manor Park should be of sufficient size to accommodate a park utility vehicle and provide secure methods for storing equipment etc. inside.
- The options report in respect of any residential properties that might become vacant in future should include an examination as to whether they might be used by the Borough Council as temporary accommodation subject to this being in accordance with the objects of the Charity.

Cobtree Railway

The Committee then discussed the next steps following the meeting with representatives of the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited and Planning Solutions, the operators of Kent Life, to discuss the viability of the proposed Cobtree Railway project. It was noted that the Managing Director of Planning Solutions had expressed reservations about the viability of the project. He would look at the figures again, but his view was unlikely to change. There was also an element of misunderstanding on the part of the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited about the funding available to the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity as the contribution that the Charity would be required to make was not achievable.

It was suggested and agreed that the Leisure Manager should meet with the Treasurers of the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity and the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited to discuss their respective finances and the potential for collaboration on alternative projects at the Cobtree Manor Estate. It was hoped that after these discussions it would be possible to come to a decision on the proposed Cobtree Railway project.

RESOLVED:

1. That the update on activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate during the period 1 January to 29 February 2020 be noted.
2. That consideration be given to the use of grasscrete paving in the overflow car park area at Cobtree Manor Park.
3. That any new storage facility at Cobtree Manor Park should be of sufficient size to accommodate a park utility vehicle and provide secure methods for storing equipment etc. inside.
4. That the options report in respect of any residential properties that might become vacant in future should include an examination as to whether they might be used by the Borough Council as temporary

accommodation subject to this being in accordance with the objects of the Charity.

5. That the Leisure Manager should meet with the Treasurers of the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity and the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited to discuss their respective finances and the potential for collaboration on projects at the Cobtree Manor Estate.

81. COBTREE MANOR PARK FINANCIAL DELEGATIONS

The Leisure Manager presented his report seeking the Committee's agreement to increasing the spending limits for Officers in relation to operational matters and emergency situations. The Leisure Manager explained that the proposals would enable the Officers to best manage budgetary spend across the Estate, be more responsive to operational needs and emergency situations and deliver the best service to visitors.

The Committee agreed that the Officer spending limits should be increased but considered that the delegation to incur expenditure above the current spending limits should be exercised in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee and be subject to the thresholds set out in the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. This would ensure checks and balances in the way that funds are expended.

RESOLVED:

1. That Officer spending above £5,000 up to a limit of £10,000 plus VAT be approved in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee and this should be accompanied by at least one written quote in advance of ordering.
2. That in emergency situations this amount be increased to £15,000 plus VAT in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee without the need to call a meeting of the Committee although this option is available to the Chairman should he/she consider it necessary.

82. PURCHASE OF PARK UTILITY VEHICLE

The Leisure Manager presented his report seeking authority to purchase a nearly new all-terrain park utility vehicle to support the day-to-day work of the Cobtree Manor Park Team. It was noted that:

Since 2014 the Team had used a second hand golf buggy to access the site and complete routine tasks. The golf buggy had not been modified for maintenance or utility work and it had not been possible to use the vehicle due to the ground conditions following the winter rainfall.

A utility vehicle was a key piece of equipment. It enabled the Park Rangers to access all areas of the Park quickly, to transport tools and materials with them, and to complete tasks efficiently and effectively.

Quotations had been obtained for more suitable vehicles and trade in quotations for the existing golf buggy.

RESOLVED:

1. That budgetary spend of £9,500 be approved for the purchase of a nearly new all-terrain park utility vehicle.
2. That delegated authority be given to the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development, in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee, to agree the final expenditure on the vehicle should the cost be above £9,500.

83. FORSTAL FIELD FUNDING AGREEMENT

The Leisure Manager presented his report updating the Committee on the position with regard to the Cobtree Young Farmers' project to introduce conservation grazing on the Forstal Field and outlining a proposed course of action to enable the Club to secure funding through a Heritage Lottery funded project. It was noted that:

- Funding was dependent upon the Club securing a minimum ten year lease and management agreement in respect of Forstal Field. However, due to its complexity, the document would not be completed in time to meet the deadline for applications for funding (31 March 2020). It was therefore proposed that the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity should enter into a funding agreement with Kent County Council that references the Cobtree Young Farmers and makes the spending of the funding conditional on the lease to the Young Farmers being in place at the time of spending. The Cobtree Manor Estate Charity would pass on all funding and land management obligations to the Young Farmers through the lease of Forstal Field.
- It was further proposed that the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development be given delegated powers to enter into the funding agreement on behalf of the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity when he is satisfied that the risks posed are satisfactorily and suitably mitigated and within acceptable levels.

The Committee agreed the proposed course of action outlined in the report, but considered that the delegation to the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development to enter into the funding agreement should be exercised in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

1. That delegated authority to enter into a funding agreement with Kent County Council, for the Heritage Lottery's Old Chalk New Downs Fund, be given to the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development who will act on behalf of the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity.

2. That the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development be given delegated authority to enter into the funding agreement, in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee, when he is satisfied that the risks posed are satisfactorily and suitably mitigated and within acceptable levels.

84. DURATION OF MEETING

2.30 p.m. to 4.00 p.m.