

A Sustainable Future for Mote Park

Business Case

v.4

“Mote Park 10 year vision (Draft)

To continue to improve the quality and range of services for visitors to and users of Mote Park, whilst protecting, conserving and enhancing the natural and historic parkland environment.

We will encourage the use of Mote Park by everyone, with particular focus on improving their health and wellbeing.

We will manage the park efficiently and effectively with a view to making the park as financially sustainable as possible in the long term.

We will work with the Mote Park Fellowship and other community and volunteer groups to improve the quality of the park, by providing meaningful opportunities to improve their environment and develop themselves.”

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1. Preliminaries.

1.1 The following assisted with the production of this business case:

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1.2 This business case is intended to pull various projects together and form the base document for the Sustainable Future for Mote Park programme team. The team has been convened to oversee the delivery of member decisions already taken in respect of this business case. Individual projects are detailed as work programmes and have officer groups to deliver them, where appropriate.

2. Executive Summary.

2.1 Business summary.

Due to a phased reduction of the Revenue Support Grant to Maidstone Borough Council and a dramatic rise in the number of visits to Mote Park, the financial pressure on the maintenance and capital budgets for our parks and open spaces is severe. The current level of service provided is unsustainable when faced with these pressures; with implications for the future of all of the open space provision across our Borough. This situation is set against a background climate where central government is encouraging local authorities to leverage assets to support and sustain services.

This business case recommends that revenue is generated to enable all of the Borough's parks and open spaces to be maintained to the standard our residents and visitors deserve, through:

- The introduction of a nominal car park charge at Mote Park, which is approved and will commence Jan/Feb 2016.
- The establishment of a pay to use leisure facility, or Adventure Zone which is approved and will be operational Mar 2017.
- The existing café operation in Mote Park being brought back in house, which has been completed.
- Investment in a new café/visitor centre with a detailed report due in 2016.
- Investment in the park infrastructure (benches; toilets; etc.) with a detailed report due in 2016.
- Facilitating well managed quality festivals and events in accordance with the adopted Festivals and Events Strategy.

2.2 Financial summary.

The business case calls for capital investment as follows:

Project	Amount	Predicted payback
Adventure Zone	£790,000	4.3 years
Existing café operation back in-house	£80,000	0.8 years
Parking charges	£87,000	0.9 years
New café/visitor centre, toilets and other park infrastructure	£2,500,000	Not applicable
Open spaces capital works	£1,424,000	Not applicable
Total investment	£3,929,000	

Offering a predicted contribution to the Medium Term Financial Strategy as follows:

Project	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Adventure Zone	-	£125,000	£175,000	£214,000	£214,000
Existing café operation back in-house	£25,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000
Parking charges	£24,500	£98,000	£98,000	£98,000	£98,000
New café/visitor centre, toilets and other park infrastructure	-	-	-	tbc	tbc
Total	£49,500	£198,125	£373,000	£412,000	£412,000

2.3 Outputs and outcomes

The programme will be delivered in support of the Council's strategic action area of, *"Ensuring there are good leisure and cultural attractions"*

The following outputs and outcomes should be achieved through delivery of this programme:

- Protect the long-term sustainability and financial future of the Council's parks and open spaces.
- Improve the leisure offering in the Borough through supporting the emerging Parks and Open Spaces Ten Year Development Plan.
- Improve health and wellbeing in the Borough through supporting the draft Parks and Open Spaces Ten Year Development Plan.
- Improve Maidstone's economy through supporting the Destination Management Plan.
- Contribute to environmental management best practice.
- Establish Mote Park as a destination recognising its status as one of Britain's best loved parks.
- Generate revenue to ease pressure on the day-to-day maintenance budgets for the open spaces managed by MBC.
- Generate revenue for future capital investment in the parks, thereby allowing standards of the Leisure offering to be maintained.
- Improve access to the parks for car users by allowing the opening of Mote Park earlier in the morning.
- Improve road safety outside Mote Park main gate in the morning.

Measures:

- Visitor and resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces.
- Visitor numbers and their contribution to the economy of Maidstone.
- Maintenance of a sustainable budget supported through income generation.

3. Background.

Maidstone Borough Council maintains 6 major parks with a further 28 open spaces under management. The 'jewel in the crown' is undoubtedly Mote Park, a 460 acre park with easy access to Maidstone town centre. The park enjoys Green Flag status and has been voted in Britain's top three parks in a national poll, for the past three years.

Mote Park has long been a major visitor attraction. Sensory Trust surveyed user numbers and demographics in 2008 as part of preparing a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a restoration project. Estimates for this year were 660,000 user visits and 180,000 car visits.

The bid was successful and Mote Park was subject to a £2.5m joint MBC and Heritage Lottery fund project completed in 2011 which significantly improved the leisure offering. It has been so successful the park has experienced an increase in visits from circa 650,000 in 2009 to 1,053,442 in this 2013/14. Cars visiting Mote Park have increased from an estimated 180,000 in 2010/11 to 384,796 in 2013/14. Numbers for both types of visits for this year are currently up on previous years continuing the upward trend.

This makes Mote Park a major visitor attraction. Although it is not comparing like-for-like attractions, to put the sheer scale of the number of visits into context, in 2012/13 Leeds Castle received 504,000 visits, and the Houses of Parliament received 1,000,000. If Mote Park was a member of the Association of Large Visitor Attractions it would be the 23rd most popular destination amongst their members, nationally.

During this period, the budget for day-to-day maintenance and Health and Safety remedial work has remained constant at approximately £1.8m per annum, across all of the parks and open spaces. This is a significant investment by MBC and represents over 10% of the Council's operating budget, in a non-statutory service. The increase in visits to the parks, and in particular Mote Park, is putting pressure on the Parks and Leisure team to maintain standards with less money available to pay for each visit being available, year-on-year. Through good management they have been able to secure Green Flag status for Mote Park, Cobtree Manor Park, Whatman Park and Clare Park and by stretching budgets to accommodate this increase in use of the Borough's open spaces. This stretching of resources has been achieved through careful management including the establishment of volunteer labour, the value of which currently stands at around £40,000 per annum (according to Heritage Lottery Fund values). If numbers continue to rise in this way, and all the indications are that they will, then the current budget will be further stretched. There is also a real risk that Mote Park will start to absorb a disproportionate amount of the Parks and Leisure budget as the exponential rise in visits to this park continues, to the detriment of the Borough's other open spaces.

The £1.8m budget referred to is for day-to-day maintenance of the parks and open spaces, and does not include capital investment to deal with wear-and-tear. Major works in the parks have always been dealt with through a bid to the Council's capital programme. The current funding position, caused by the reduction, and presumed abolition of the Revenue Support Grant is putting pressure of the Council's finances to the extent that priority for this type of investment will become lower over time, as the Council focuses on delivering statutory services with less money.

In the next ten years major investments will be needed in our parks and open spaces with an estimated cost of £1,429,000. A detailed list of these capital works is as follows:

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Major Capital Works for Parks and Open Spaces forecast for 2016-2020							Dec-15
Location	Capital Items	Estimated Cost	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Comments
A Sustainable future for Mote Park							
Mote Park	Main Play Area replacement as part of Adventure Zone project and spatial planning framework.	£300,000	£300,000				Including safety surfacing, paths, equipment and fencing. Some funding available from S106 to make up difference to total cost of C. £400,000
Mote Park	Overflow car park. Surfacing to allow for regular year round usage.	£210,000	£210,000				Based on grasscrete. Final specification would be required.
Mote Park	Relocation of Park Maintenance Area as part of new spatial planning framework in preparation for new café/visitor centre	£250,000		£250,000			Area for parks maintenance team and volunteers to work away from main visitor and amenity area. Location to be agreed.
Mote Park	New Café/Visitor centre to provide additional catering facilities, visitor information, education space and ticket office.	£2,500,000		£500,000	£2,000,000		The investment in Mote Park will position it as a destination and a new café visitor centre is essential to pulling all of the projects together and achieving the vision which will be set out in the 10 year plan.
General maintenance and repair projects							
Mote Park	Resurface main entrance roadway following investment in Adventure Zone and new Café/Visitor Centre.	£146,000				£146,000	824m. New sleeping policemen, road markings and signage require Roadway £131,000. Other £15,000
Mote Park	Resurface main roadway/path/cycle path from main park entrance to Willington Street following investment in Adventure Zone and new Café/Visitor Centre..	£223,000				£223,000	1.3km. Dual usage path. Signage sleeping policemen and road marking required. Roadway £208,000. Other £15,000
Mote Park	Improvements to water management from Lake to River Len.	£200,000		£200,000			This work forms part of an on-going dialogue with the engineers over the original work and may be subject to an insurance claim. Reservoir Engineers reviewing current design. More detail will follow.
Giddyhorn Lane	Surface car park.	£25,000		£25,000			574m ² Based on grasscrete. Final specification would be required. This car park is very dusty and wearing away.
Borough Wide	Repairs to footpaths in major parks	£75,000		£75,000			Estimated figure. No work has been done to foot paths in parks for 10 years. Major works will need to be done within the next 5 years. This could be programmed over 5 years.
		£3,929,000	£510,000	£1,050,000		£369,000	

In addition, Mote Park has 114 significant trees, all of which are worth thousands of pounds, along with a large amount of amenity woodland. Current maintenance involves Health and Safety type work only, and does not include arboriculture best practice which would prolong the life of this asset considerably. Current estimates are that £100,000 of work would be required to bring the woodland stock up to gold standard, with an annual budget of £25,000 thereafter. The Heritage, Culture and Leisure Committee has dealt with this through their decisions concerning the implementation of parking charges.

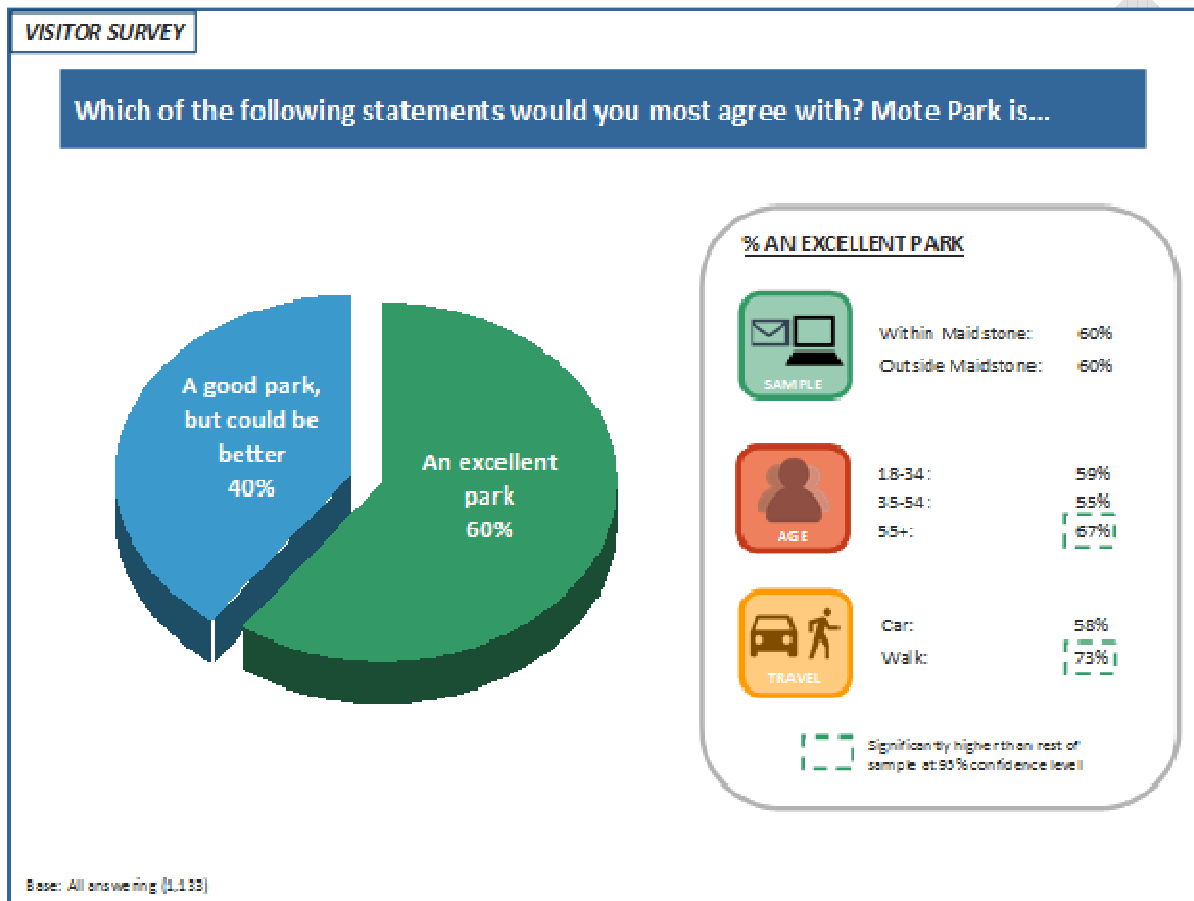
In order to better understand the profile of visitors to Mote Park; to try and understand why they are increasing at such a fast rate; and to understand their hopes and aspirations for Mote Park, MBC commissioned Lake Market Research to undertake a survey in August and September 2014. The results of their work are at annex D.

It seems that a large number of the people are travelling from outside of the Borough to use Mote Park. The Lake Market Research survey shows 42% of people who use the park are visitors from outside the Borough. This has interesting implications for the demographic of car visits to the park. The evidence suggests that the majority of car visits are actually from people outside the Borough, and that the number of car visits from the most deprived wards in Maidstone is relatively small.

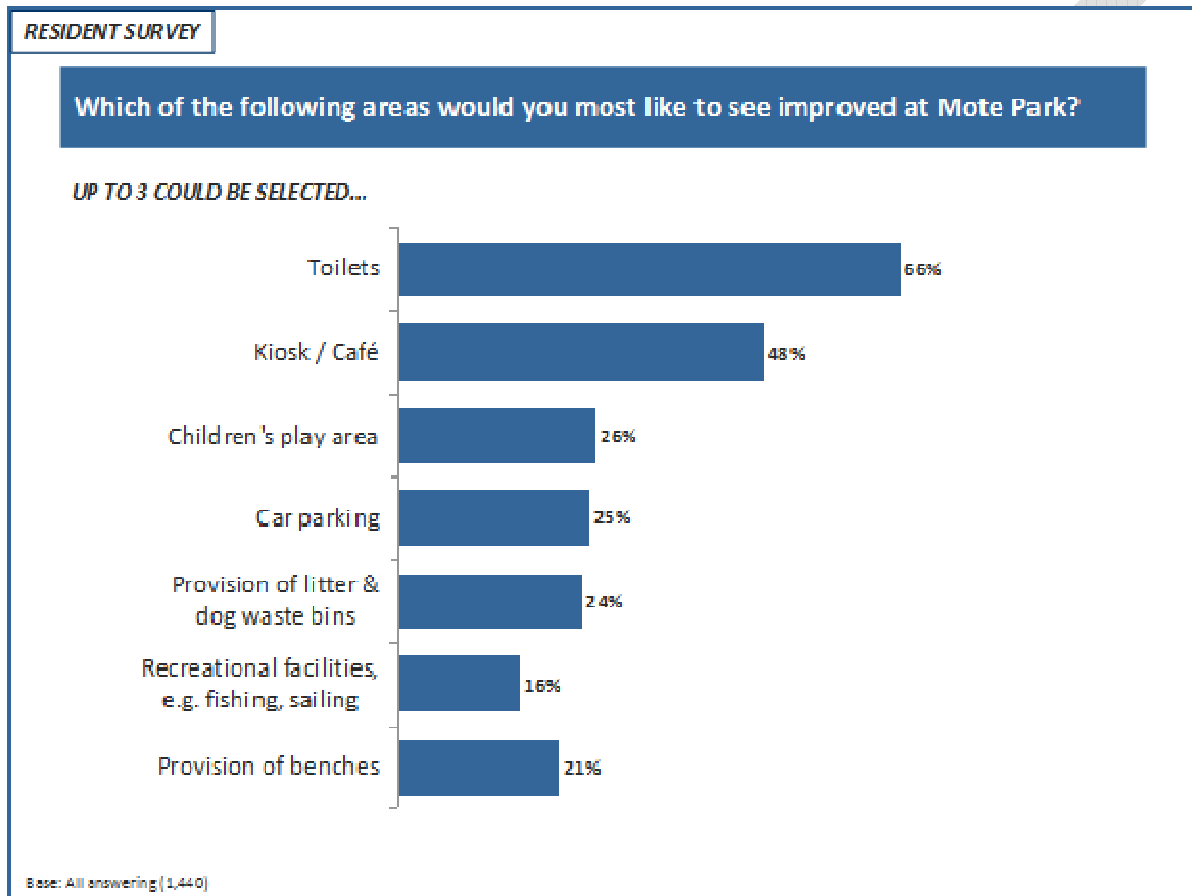
The current funding arrangements for our open spaces, given the huge rise in popularity of Mote Park, are no longer sustainable and a drop in standards of our open space provision can be viewed as being imminent. This situation is exacerbated by MBC's current financial position which is unlikely to allow increases in budgets and mean capital bids are given lower priority.

The residents of the Borough and visitors to Mote Park have been asked their views about the park. The full results can be found at Annex D but pertinent headlines were as follows:

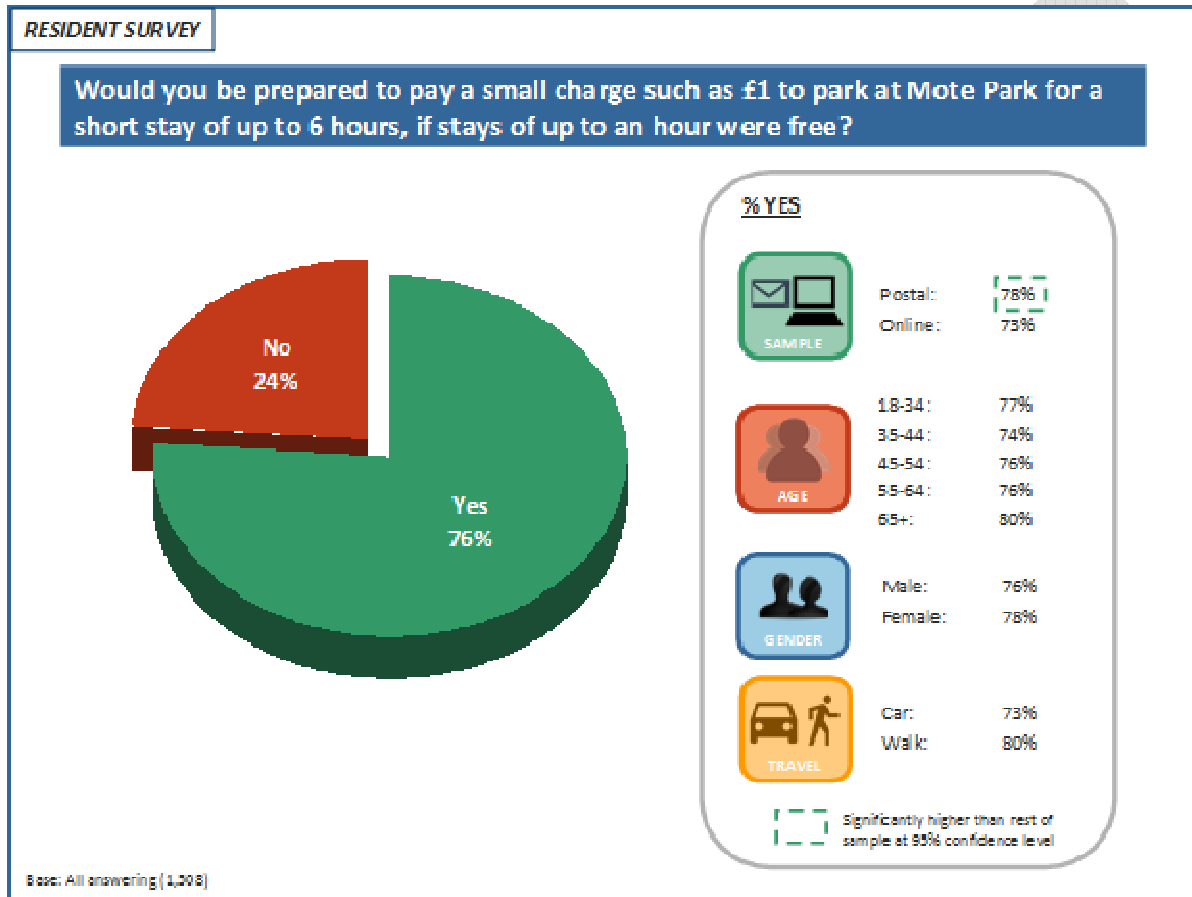
Satisfaction with Mote Park



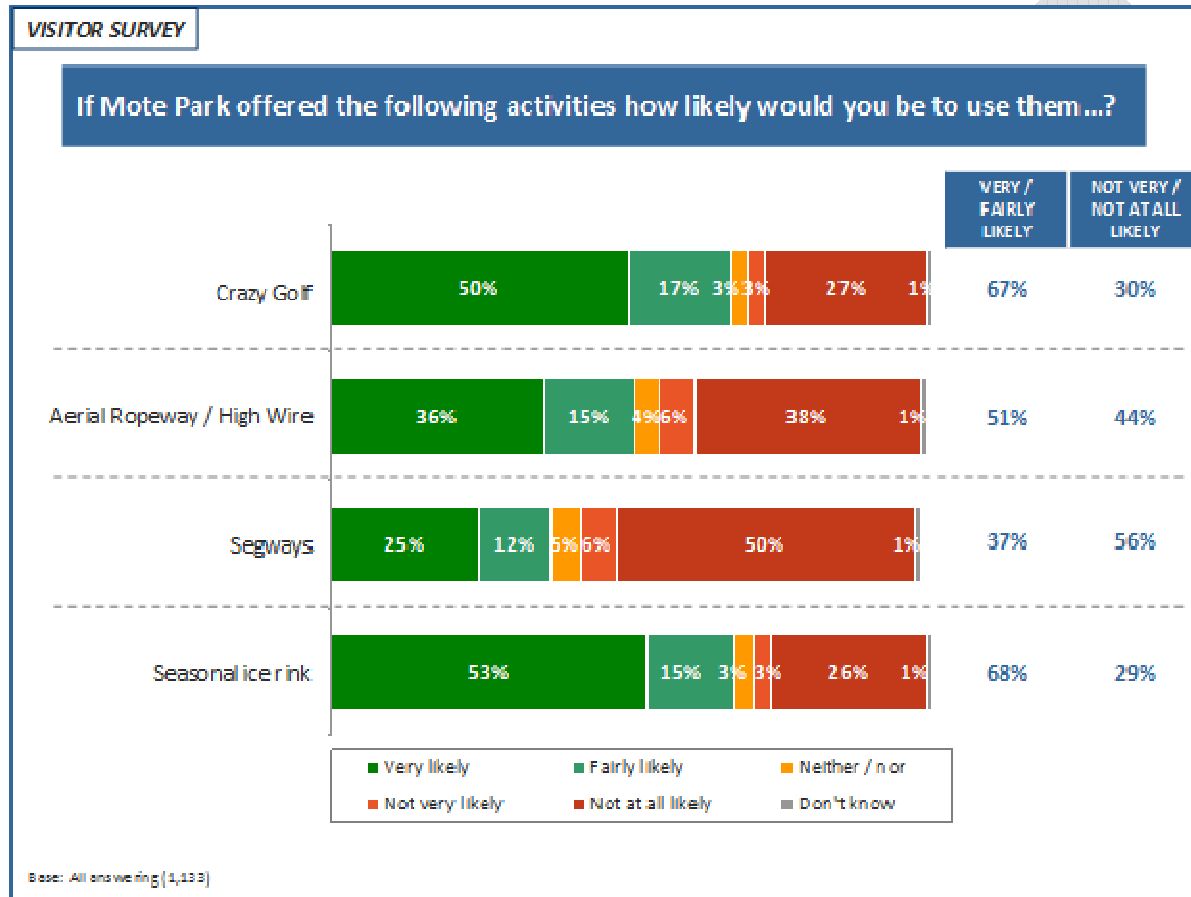
Areas for improvement



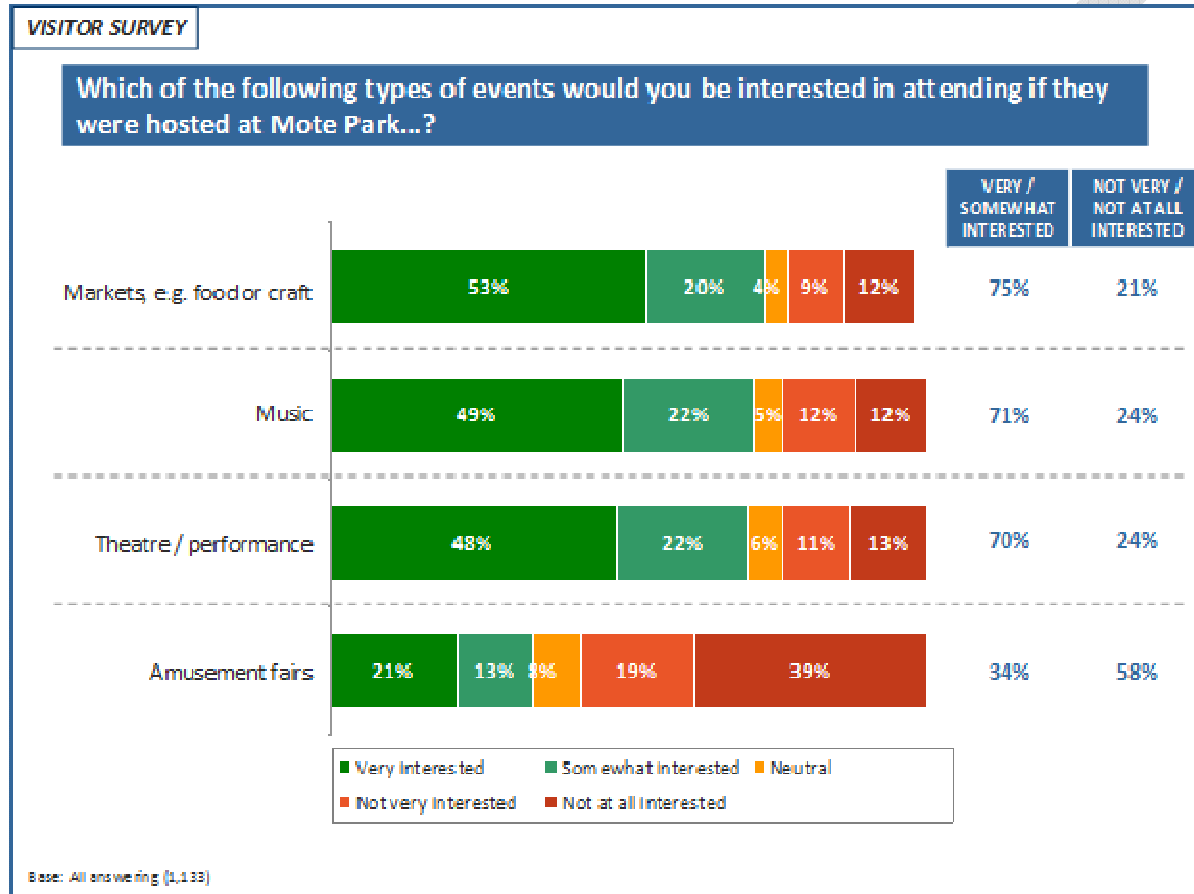
Support for a nominal parking charge



Interest in new activities



Interest in events



3.1 Community benefits afforded by the Borough's open spaces.

It is very important that MBC does everything it can to maintain our open spaces at a high standard. They bring social, health and economic benefits to our residents and business. This is true of all our open spaces, but focusing on Mote Park in particular it is worth reminding ourselves of the benefits it brings.

Mote Park serves four of the key neighbourhoods that make up the areas of higher deprivation of Maidstone:

- Park Wood
- High Street
- Shepway North
- Shepway South

Visitors from these wards make up 29% of the visits to the park, from those visiting from within the Borough. This equates to 216,920 visits.

Well-designed parks are valued parts of the environment. Mote Park promotes physical activity and community engagement; and provides both environmental and mental health benefits. Well-designed parks have been shown to reduce stress and foster community interaction. Mote Park provides a local resource for its surrounding communities and maximizes its positive impact on public health (through children's play, water sports, health walks, community activities, volunteering, and social space).

Mote Park can improve health in several ways including:

- Increased physical activity- walkable access to appropriate site motivates people to participate in physical activity and to do so more frequently;
- Improved mental health- parks can serve as a venue for stress reduction;
- Environmental benefits- parks can reduce air and water pollution
- Community interaction- parks can provide meeting places for neighbours;
- Reduce injury- parks can provide safe spaces for people to play and exercise, away from busy streets and commercial zones.

People who are exposed to the greenest environments also have the lowest levels of health inequality among low-income households. Physical environments, like Mote Park can promote good health and might be important to reduce socioeconomic health inequalities.

3.1.a Local groups at risk from a reduction in our open spaces provision.

Obesity – children and young people

- Obesity is an important issue in Maidstone; 10.7% of 4-5 year olds are obese, while 20% of 10-11 year olds are obese. Nationally, 9.4% of 4-5 year olds are obese and 19% of 10-11 year olds are obese.
- Mounting evidence suggests that a critical period during which to prevent childhood obesity and its related consequences is before the age of five. The best thing we can do for children from 0-5 is create ways of life which continue to make obesity unlikely.
- Children who live in more deprived areas are more likely to be overweight and obese than those from the most affluent areas. Making what may seem like simple changes to daily habits (physical and nutritional) is sometimes simply too difficult given all the other difficulties many families have to confront. Maidstone has the highest level of overweight children in reception year in 2011/12 at 16% of children measured.
- In some of our most deprived wards obesity levels in children aged 4-5 is higher than 12%.

Obesity and physical activity

- Maidstone has slightly higher rates of healthy eating and physical activity compared to England as a whole.
- 60.9% of adults in Maidstone participate in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week. However, this hides some pockets of inactivity in the borough.
- 66.2% of our population is overweight or obese, higher than the national average of 63.8%.
- 26% of our population is obese, which puts Maidstone in the top 20% of Local Authorities with the highest levels of obesity.
- Access and choice in making healthy food choices are very much more limited in the areas of greatest deprivation. There are more take aways in the most deprived areas of Maidstone, as compared to the most affluent.
- Obesity can contribute to a range of health conditions, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, indigestion and some cancers. Adult and child obesity levels are becoming an increasing issue for the health service, as greater numbers of people put on extra weight, through poor diet or insufficient exercise. Obesity is far more prevalent in disadvantaged groups.

Mental Health

- Hospital stays for self-harm are higher in Maidstone than the national average at a rate of 215.3 per 100,000 population.
- There is a social gradient in self-harm and some wards present a significantly higher rate of self-harm and suicide than Maidstone generally.

In summary it is important that we maintain our open spaces and keep them free at the point of delivery so that our most vulnerable residents, from our most deprived areas are not disproportionately affected by either the current situation (a reduction in standards of our open spaces), or any remedial measures introduced to deal with the funding issues identified in para. 2.

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4. Proposed Solution.

Mote Park is the key factor in the problems faced by the Parks and Leisure budgets, and so the focus of efforts should be at this park as they will have the greatest overall effect. The most significant commercial opportunity exists within this park also, with its large footfall and vehicle numbers.

As part of a range of income generating measures, it is proposed that revenue be generated in this park as follows:

4.1 The introduction of nominal car park charges.

The impact of this charge is likely to be felt most by visitors from outside of the Borough, then by those travelling from more affluent wards and least of all by the most socially disadvantaged wards which are within walking distance of the park.

This would see the installation of managed parking at the three car parks within Mote Park using a pay-and-display system. A free parking period of one hour will be allowed with a nominal fee of £1 to park for up to six hours (the market research showing that 98% of visits to the park are for 6 hours or less). Stay of longer than six hours would be charged at double the standard MBC car park rate in order to deter commuter parkers.

This would also allow improved access to Mote Park which is currently locked to cars prior to 09:00 on week days to deter commuter parkers.

The Committee has approved this measure and charging will commence from January 2016.

4.2 Bringing the existing café back in-house.

The market research conducted in 2014 showed that the lowest levels of satisfaction concerned the toilets and the café. The café operators contract ended in November 2015 and it was proposed that the contract is not renewed and the operation of the café is brought back in-house. It was expected that this would result in a significant improvement in the catering provision and would generate significant extra revenue.

This measure is now complete.

4.3 Establish an Adventure Zone

Create a pay-to-use leisure offering, comprising:

- A high rope course.
- An adventure golf course.
- A climbing wall.
- Segway hire.

The model is taken from the one found at the National Watersports Centre in Nottingham.

4.4 Facilitating well managed, quality events

Lay on events in line with the Festival and Events Strategy which contribute to community creativity, social enjoyment and economic benefit. .

4.5 Investing in a new café/visitor centre and other infrastructure

An appropriate, fit for purpose facility which supports a destination of this importance; and which optimises commercial opportunity.

4.6 Recommendation.

As discussed, most of the measures described in this document have already been approved by members. The predicted contributions from these measures are now included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

The remaining measures will be taken for decision in January 2016.

The recommendation is that the execution of already approved measures continues and that the Council approves the measures which will come forward in January 2016.

5. Financial analysis.

Financial projections can be found at Annex A (But not when this business case is attached to a public report).

6. Conclusion.

Although the issue of developing Mote Park to generate revenue can be an emotive subject the reality is that is action is not taken now to make provision for the long-term financial provision of our open spaces there is a very real short to medium term risk that the standard of our open spaces will start to fall dramatically.

The introduction of these measures will contribute significantly to our open spaces, and is appropriate given the demographic of users of Mote Park.

ANNEXES

Annex A – Financial projections