

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COBTREE MANOR ESTATE CHARITY COMMITTEE

MINUTES (PART I) OF THE MEETING HELD ON
4 NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Councillor Garten (Chairman) and
Councillors Cox, Harper, Perry and Springett

Also Present: Mrs Sandra Knatchbull – Chairman, Cobtree Charity
Trust Limited

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

32. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

33. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

34. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

There were no Visiting Members.

35. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

Councillor Springett said that Mrs Sandra Knatchbull, the Chairman of the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited, who was present at the meeting as an observer, was a friend and neighbour. However, they had not discussed matters relating to the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity Committee.

The Chairman welcomed Mrs Knatchbull to the meeting.

36. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

37. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED: That the item on Part II of the agenda be taken in private as proposed.

38. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 SEPTEMBER 2021

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 9 September 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed.

39. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

40. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

41. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

42. COBTREE MANOR ESTATE FINANCIAL POSITION

The Senior Finance Manager (Client) introduced his report summarising the financial position of the Cobtree Manor Estate as at 30 September 2021. The report covered the Golf Course, Kent Life, the Manor Park and the residential properties.

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

- The position as at 30 September 2021 was a surplus of £25,873 against the profiled budget for the year to date.
- There had been a question before the meeting about how the figures in the table at paragraph 3.1.1 of his report were presented. By way of explanation, in the middle three columns of that table, minus figures represented net income to the Estate and plus figures represented net expenditure. The final column was the variance against the current budget.
- There had been a higher than anticipated level of spend against the parks hard landscaping budget due to the need for a new door at the Visitor Centre and the creation of a new parking area. Funding of this overspend would be addressed when the draft budget proposals for 2022/23 and an updated budget for this year were submitted to the next meeting of the Committee. For example, car parking income continued to exceed the budgeted figure as visitor numbers to the Manor Park remained high and there were other budgets that remained unspent at present.
- Fencing repairs had been undertaken at the Golf Course and although this showed as an overspend against the profiled budget, the cost of the works was within the total budget for repairs and maintenance.
- Rental income from the residential properties was under budget due to Garden Cottage being vacant whilst the refurbishment works were

taking place. It was understood that these works were substantially complete and within budget.

- The value of the Charity's investment in Charifund currently stood at £860,945 compared to the value of £867,762 in July 2021. Further updates would be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.

In response to questions:

The Leisure Manager confirmed that the reference to the need for a new door at the Visitor Centre was incorrect as the work had involved a refurbishment.

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

- He would undertake a review of Charifund and how it was performing compared to other funds;
- As part of this exercise, he would consider whether funds invested in Charifund might be used more appropriately to repay the money borrowed from the Borough Council in relation to the car park improvement works at Cobtree Manor Park; and
- He would review the way in which the figures in the table set out at paragraph 3.1.1 of the report were presented and report back with a format that might be more easily understood.

RESOLVED: That subject to the points raised in the discussion, the financial position of the Cobtree Manor Estate as at 30 September 2021 be noted.

43. COBTREE ESTATE UPDATE

The Leisure Manager introduced his report providing an update on activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate since the last meeting of the Committee in September 2021. It was noted that:

Cobtree Manor Park

- Car park income for the first half of the year was £67,363, which was a positive variance of more than £26,000.
- The Hazlitt Theatre had staged two sell-out performances of Alice in Wonderland in the Park on 3 and 4 September 2021 and tickets for the winter lights trail from 15 December 2021 to 31 December 2021 were selling well.
- The Park Manager had secured a donation of time and resources from a local company to plant new hedgerows in and around the Park. The hedgerows would provide better biodiversity and wildlife habitat and, in time, replace ageing fencing.

- The Council's Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager had identified areas at the Cobtree Manor Estate as being suitable for additional tree planting and some natural flood prevention works as follows:

The perimeter of Forstal Field including the boundary with the M20;
The Kent Life boundary with the M20; and
The north west corner of the Estate beyond the Golf Course.

A meeting would be held with some of the tenant organisations to discuss the practicalities of taking this initiative forward.

Cobtree Golf Course

- Summer trading at the Golf Course had continued to recover with membership numbers, green fees and casual visitor numbers above pre-pandemic levels. The Golf Course was now moving into its winter operation with reduced hours of opening but with more events and social gatherings taking place inside where restrictions allowed.

Kent Life

- Kent Life was also continuing to recover post-pandemic with events planned for Bonfire Night and Christmas.
- Work to catalogue the Kent Life collection of artifacts had progressed. Meetings had been held with colleagues at Maidstone Museum and some external heritage organisations specialising in farming and rural life had been engaged. A report would be submitted to a future meeting when plans were sufficiently developed.

Cobtree Café

- Cobtree Café had continued to trade well throughout the summer and repairs to the flooring in the Visitor Centre toilets had been completed.

Cobtree Shed Group/Elephant House

- The Cobtree Shed Group had arranged more suitable alternative accommodation at Kent Life. Once vacant, the Elephant House building would be made good and options for its future use would be considered. In the short term, it would be used for storage purposes.

In response to questions, the Leisure Manager advised the Committee that:

- Although there was not an official Friends Group, a number of volunteer groups used the Park and there was potential to involve them in the tree planting project. In terms of engaging with the Woodland Trust or other groups, he would need to take advice from the Park Manager and the Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager about the scope and scale of the project and how many people could be involved.

- The Cobtree Café was planning to open on some of the days when the winter lights trail was taking place and the event organisers would also be providing refreshments along the route.

The Chairman took the opportunity to congratulate the Officers on Cobtree Manor Park again achieving Green Flag status.

RESOLVED: That the update on activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate since the last meeting of the Committee in September 2021 be noted.

44. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC FROM THE MEETING

RESOLVED: That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business because of the likely disclosure of exempt information for the reason specified, having applied the Public Interest Test:

Head of Schedule 12A and Brief Description

Estate Investment

3 – Financial/Business Affairs

45. ESTATE INVESTMENT

The Leisure Manager introduced his joint report with the Senior Finance Manager (Client) concerning potential future capital investment at the Cobtree Manor Estate. The report summarised the immediate capital concerns relating to assets at the Estate and included an updated cashflow projection to assist the Committee in its decision making. Reference was also made to discussions which had taken place with representatives of the Cobtree Charity Trust Limited regarding the possibility of relocating the carriages currently housed in the Carriage Museum to the Cobtree Manor Estate.

The Committee identified its capital investment priorities and gave instructions to the Officers as to the way to proceed, including the development of a capital funding plan for investment in the Estate.

46. DURATION OF MEETING

2.00 p.m. to 4.05 p.m.