

**Future Cobtree Manor Park Management and Operation
Proposal**

Final Decision-Maker	Cobtree Manor Estate Committee
Lead Head of Service	John Foster - Head of Regeneration and Economic Development
Lead Officer and Report Author	Mike Evans – Leisure Manager
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All Wards

Executive Summary

The report sets out four options for the future management and operation of Cobtree Manor Park. Previously the park was managed alongside Maidstone Borough Council's parks and open spaces however now has its own management team. The report considers the challenges faced by the current arrangements and the benefits other delivery models could offer the Estate Charity including improved flexibility and value for money.

Purpose of Report
Decision

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the Committee agrees to the principle of a combined parks management structure to enable a full staff consultation to be undertaken.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Cobtree Manor Estate Charity Committee	5 November 2020

Future Cobtree Manor Park Management and Operation Proposal

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	The operation of the Estate directly supports the objects of the Trust as set out when the Council became the Corporate Trustee	Mike Evans – Leisure Manager
Cross Cutting Objectives	The operation of the Estate supports the Council’s strategic objective to ensure there are good leisure and cultural attractions in the Borough.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Risk Management	The risk management considerations are included in section 5 of the report.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Financial	The financial considerations for the Committee are outlined in 3.2. The preliminary costs for each option are included, however following staff consultation into the changes, a full cost breakdown of final proposal will be presented to the Committee for approval.	Section 151 Officer & Finance Manager
Staffing	The recommendation poses significant staff changes within Parks, Grounds Maintenance and Leisure which will require careful management and staff consultation.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Legal	Once a recommendation has been made, legal advice should be sought on employment (TUPE) implications and any procurement and / or contractual issues to ensure that the Estate remains within legal boundaries.	Team Leader, Contract and Commissioning
Privacy and Data Protection	There are no specific privacy or data protection issues to address.	Anna Collier Policy and Information Manager
Equalities	If the recommendation is taken forward, an equality impact assessment will be undertaken as part of the staff consultation process.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Public Health	There are no additional implications arising from this report.	Hannah Gaston, Housing and

		Inclusion Manager
Crime and Disorder	There are no additional implications arising from this report.	Head of Environment and Public Realm
Procurement	Should option 2 or 3 be agreed, there will potentially be procurement requirements associated with the purchase of equipment or outsourcing the grounds maintenance requirement. This will be discussed with the procurement team and a Procurement Plan agreed prior to the purchase of any equipment or services.	Head of Environment and Public Realm

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Up until 2017, Maidstone Borough Council's Parks and Leisure Team managed all council-owned parks and open spaces as well as Cobtree Manor Park, on behalf of the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity. The grounds maintenance service for all these assets was provided by Maidstone Borough Council's in-house Grounds Maintenance Team.
- 1.2 However, when the Parks and Leisure Team was split into two, the operation of Cobtree Manor Park along with the charity's other assets remained with the Leisure Team whilst Maidstone's parks team moved to join Environmental Services.
- 1.3 The Leisure Manager has identified limitations for the current operational arrangements for Cobtree Manor Park. The Park employs three dedicated staff – the Cobtree Manager and two rangers. Their work in the park is restricted by the equipment they have available to them and therefore a significant proportion of the mechanical work required is carried out by the council's in-house grounds maintenance team for an additional cost, or is not carried out. This has a significant impact on the productivity of the Cobtree Team and therefore the value for money offered to the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity.
- 1.4 Maidstone's in-house Grounds Maintenance Team currently undertakes all amenity and bridleway grass cutting at an annual cost of £21,600 based on 12 cuts for amenity grass and 6 cuts for the horse ride. They also regularly carry out one-off work including play area repairs as well as the more regular provision of additional staff to cover peak times. Therefore, the actual cost to the Estate Charity ranges between £30k to over £50k in addition to the salary costs for the park's own rangers and manager.
- 1.5 It is also important to highlight that this currently excludes any shrub-bed maintenance costs, as this has not been undertaken in the past few years. However, this work will need to be carried out and it is unlikely it could be

carried out with the park's own staff. This work is estimated to cost around £17,000 per year.

- 1.6 The schedule of works for Cobtree is included in appendix 1.
 - 1.7 Waste collection and the provision of out of hours duty officer cover remain outside of these costs as they are provided through separate contracts or agreements.
 - 1.8 The Head of Environment and Public Realm, who is responsible for the Borough's Parks and Open Spaces, has also identified opportunities within the Parks and Grounds Maintenance Teams to reduce duplication, increase resilience and create an improved, future-focused team with greater responsibility for enhancing biodiversity and improving the customer experience. The current structure of the parks and grounds maintenance teams is included in appendix 2. It shows significant overlap in responsibilities for the park management aspects of the roles of the two departments.
 - 1.9 Therefore, there is now the opportunity to reconsider the benefits of operating all Parks and Open Spaces within a single management structure and enabling the Grounds Maintenance Team to focus on commercial landscaping services and the routine mechanical maintenance services provided across Maidstone's parks and open spaces as well as the cemetery and crematorium.
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3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 There are four options available for the onward management and operation of Cobtree Manor Park:
 - **Continue as is** – this would involve the existing team to continue to provide a permanent presence in the park with the mechanical or specialist grounds maintenance work carried out by Maidstone's in-house grounds maintenance team.
 - **Fully in-house using Cobtree dedicated staff** – investment in equipment and training to enable rangers to carry out all grounds maintenance work within the park.
 - **Contracted out** – for all regular grounds maintenance work to be contracted out to either Maidstone's in-house team or a private contractor with TUPE transfer of staff.
 - **New combined management structure within Parks** – For the management of the park to be incorporated into a new parks team responsible for Maidstone's parks as well as Cobtree Manor Park and for all grounds maintenance to be carried out by rangers and supported by Grounds Maintenance Team.
- 3.2 A headline cost comparison is shown below (table 1). The staff costs include salaries and on costs.

	Current model	Fully in-house with Cobtree staff	Fully contracted out	New combined management structure
Staffing (including on-costs)	£ 86,370	£ 86,370	£ 39,480	£ 83,653
Grounds Maintenance (grass cutting)	£ 21,600		£ 18,180	£ 18,180
Grounds Maintenance (shrub beds)	£ 17,000		£ 19,537	£ 19,537
Grounds Maintenance (litter picking)	£ 2,504	-	£ 40,575	-
Equipment depreciation	-	£ 15,000	-	-
Storage / green waste disposal	TBC	£ 35,000		
TOTAL ANNUAL COST	£ 127,474	£ 136,370	£ 117,772	£ 121,370

Table 1 showing headline costs comparisons of the four options

- 3.3 The current model includes a TBC cost for storage and green waste. The park currently does not have any green waste solution and needs one. The cost of the current model will need to increase in future and is likely to be £140k-£145k per annum once a green waste contract is in place. The green waste skip would also need to be stored in the car park somewhere, which would detract from the appeal of the park. This is not a current cost but is a future concern of the current model.
- 3.4 Whilst the first three options are self-explanatory, the fourth option for a new combined management structure within parks offers a more complex change to park management and operation.
- 3.5 This hybrid option enables the combination of park management expertise with the benefits of a flexible operational arrangement utilising seven-day-a-week staffing cover and grounds maintenance resources.
- 3.6 The exempt appendix shows the proposed structure. The Parks Team would therefore be responsible for delivering the management plan for the park and managing the grounds maintenance budget set by the Estate Charity. A proportion of the salary costs for the Parks and Open Spaces Manager and the positions directly responsible for managing and operating the park would be charged to the charity and is included in the staffing costs in table 1. There would be no further management charges for officer time relating to arrangements for additional works, for example raising orders for external arboriculture work.
- 3.7 Whilst the combined structure no longer includes a full-time manager role, the staff costs reflect the seven day per week service to be provided by a ranger and attendants as well as the additional support and contribution from the Parks and Open Spaces Manager. The frontline level of staffing present in the park every day would not decrease, and being part of a combined structure would enable staffing to be more flexible and suit park needs.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 There are benefits and challenges to each of the four options as outlined below:

	Benefits	Challenges
As is	<p>No change – no risk of redundancies or changes to the staff working practices.</p>	<p>Resilience – with a small team there is a risk when staff leave or are absent and this will generate significant additional costs to cover the work</p> <p>Consistency – when managed separately to Maidstone’s parks there is risk of inconsistency between service or efficiencies that are left unmaximised.</p> <p>Productivity – the current staff are often under-utilised or unable to undertake work involving machinery. This is a particular problem with seasonal peaks in demand</p> <p>Green waste – The current work undertaken by the rangers produces unsustainable levels of green waste. This is managed currently by on site recycling but this is not a long-term solution.</p>
Fully in-house with Cobtree staff	<p>Productivity – will increase productivity of staff</p> <p>Flexibility – will have higher level of flexibility to focus staff’s tasks during seasonal peaks</p>	<p>Investment – there is a requirement for a high upfront cost of investment and training and then ongoing investment in equipment.</p> <p>Risk / H&S – will require the Cobtree Manager to spend a lot of time ensuring full compliance, risk assessments and safe systems of work are in place, which is not best use of time.</p> <p>Resilience – risk of training staff and then losing them to private</p>

		<p>sector. With such small team, this would have a significant impact on the team's resilience</p> <p>Storage - Cobtree Park does not have suitable, secure storage for equipment that will be needed and is not able to arrange this in the short term.</p> <p>Green Waste - Cobtree does not have a green waste contractor and does not have space for a green waste storage facility.</p>
<p>Fully contracted out</p>	<p>Risk / H&S – gain expertise from contractor</p> <p>Resilience – Wider pool of resources (equipment and staff) to maintain business continuity</p> <p>Productivity – resource can be flexed to meet seasonal demands</p>	<p>Flexibility – less likely to be flexible, especially if outsourced to private contractor. Will follow agreed specification.</p> <p>Staff insecurity – particularly a challenge if outsourced to private contractor</p> <p>Standards of work and disputes with contractor. Will require contract monitoring and compliance checks from the leisure team, which could lead to protracted conversations and disagreements.</p>
<p>New management structure</p>	<p>Consistency – single management structure overseeing operation of all parks</p> <p>Resilience - both from management and operational perspective</p> <p>Flexibility – able to flex the resource to meet seasonal demands as well as any particular service needs e.g. events</p>	<p>Change – poses significant change to staff and requires consultation and placing individuals at risk.</p>

	<p>Productivity – wider pool of staff to move staff according to skills to gain maximum productivity</p> <p>Risk / H&S – expertise in compliance within Environmental Services Team</p> <p>Wider Parks expertise – the new structure enables Cobtree to benefit from additional park management and biodiversity expertise</p>	
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- 4.2 The option to create a new combined park structure offers the Cobtree Manor Estate Charity the most resilient and flexible service which also provides better value for money than the current arrangements. However, it is noted that the changes will be more complex than the other options and will involve staff consultation and more detailed financial modelling to ensure the split of resources is fully accounted.
- 4.3 It is therefore recommended that the Cobtree Manor Estate Committee agrees that a new combined management structure is pursued, and a full staff consultation is carried out before the final proposal is brought back to the committee for decision, along with a final breakdown of the costs.

5. RISK

- 5.1 At this stage, the report is seeking approval to progress to a staff consultation on the proposal to combine the Cobtree Manor Park management and operational team with Maidstone Borough Council’s Parks Team. This will ensure that the views of the staff affected are considered and reduce any risk to the council or charity.
- 5.2 The committee will then be able to consider if the proposed combined structure offers the best service for Cobtree Manor Park in terms of affordability, flexibility, resilience, and customer experience.
- 5.3 The risks associated with each of the considered management options are covered in section 4.1.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 This report seeks to gain approval to start a staff consultation process on changes to the Parks and Cobtree management teams. It is recognised that it is important to gain the committee's approval for the principle of a combined management structure before proceeding with formal staff engagement.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 If the committee agrees to the recommendation, the next step is to carry out a 30-day consultation with the staff affected by the proposed changes, giving them an opportunity to ask questions and contribute their own ideas.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Schedule of works

Appendix 2 – Current staff structure

Exempt Appendix – Proposed Combined Staff Structure

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None