

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COBTREE MANOR ESTATE CHARITY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES (PART I) OF THE REMOTE MEETING HELD ON
5 NOVEMBER 2020**

Present: Councillor Cox (Chairman) and Councillors Daley,
Mrs Gooch, Perry and Springett

119. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

120. NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no Substitute Members.

121. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

122. NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS

There were no Visiting Members.

123. DISCLOSURES BY MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

There were no disclosures by Members or Officers.

124. DISCLOSURES OF LOBBYING

There were no disclosures of lobbying.

125. EXEMPT ITEMS

RESOLVED:

1. That item 16 (Cobtree Estate Contracts Update Report) be taken in private as proposed.
2. That items 15 (Minutes (Part II) of the meeting held on 10 September 2020) and 17 (Exempt Appendix to item 14 (Future Cobtree Manor Park Management and Operation)) be considered in public but the information contained therein should remain private.

126. MINUTES (PARTS I AND II) OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2020

RESOLVED: That the Minutes (Parts I and II) of the meeting held on 10 September 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed.

127. PRESENTATION OF PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

128. QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from members of the public.

129. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO THE CHAIRMAN

There were no questions from Members to the Chairman.

130. 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 2020. The report covered the performance of the Golf Course, Kent Life, Cobtree Manor Park (including the Café) and residential properties and highlighted the need for robust management and monitoring of the budget in response to the significant risks to the finances and operations of the Estate presented by the on-going COVID-19 situation.

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

- The key message at present was that there were no significant issues regarding running costs within the budget. The Charity was underspent by approximately £48,000 although this did assume that it would receive all the expected contract income. If the Charity were to receive all of that income, it would be looking at a breakeven position at the end of the year.
- At present there was no outstanding income due from Kent Life; there were two outstanding invoices in respect of the Café (one relating to 2019/20); and, in terms of the Golf Course, an invoice had been sent to Mytime Active for the remainder of the Quarter 1 period and Quarter 2 would also be invoiced if an investigation by the Head of Finance into their annual finances concluded that no further contract relief was necessary.
- Given the situation with contract income there were some concerns around the cashflow position. This was being monitored closely and discussions were ongoing with the Director of Finance and Business Improvement to ensure that there were sufficient resources in place to meet ongoing commitments.

- Members had requested that an updated Capital Programme be reported to this meeting of the Committee for consideration. However, due to the uncertainty over income at present this had not been progressed. It was considered that it would be sensible to wait until there was more certainty over income before bringing forward any proposed schemes.
- The value of the Charity's investment in Charifund had stabilised at approximately £680,000 compared to a value of £930,938 in January 2020. It was hoped that the value of the investment would improve as the economy recovered.

In response to a question, the Senior Finance Manager (Client) advised the Committee that the introduction of negative interest rates could affect the return on the Charity's investment in Charifund. He hoped that the Investment Fund managers would provide guidance on the potential impact.

RESOLVED: That the financial position of the Cobtree Manor Estate as at 30 September 2020, as set out in the report of the Senior Finance Manager (Client) and as updated at the meeting, be noted.

131. COBTREE ESTATE UPDATE REPORT

The Leisure Manager presented his report providing an update on activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate since the last meeting of the Committee in September 2020. It was noted that:

- Cobtree Manor Park continued to be busy. Car park income had recovered following the closure of the Park in March and April 2020 and was now £17,000 ahead of budget.
- The children's play equipment was being repaired and winter tree works had started that day and would be completed by the end of the following week.
- The automation of the Park gates meant that access to the Park was now in line with the advertised opening and closing times.
- The busy summer period at the Golf Course was now drawing to a close and the Golf Course development works to be carried out by the operator would begin in late November.
- Kent Life had continued to manage the recovery from the COVID-19 closure very well, managing costs and maximising opportunities where possible, but progress was now being hampered by the second national lockdown for England.
- Cobtree Café had re-opened with social distancing guidelines being followed.

- The Elephant House was out of use because of health and safety and building regulations concerns. The Charity was unable to pre-pay for any works on behalf of the tenant due to the current financial situation.

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

- The situation regarding the Elephant House would be reviewed in due course but it could not be used by anyone at present due to the COVID-19 restrictions.
- Cobtree Manor Park had received a Green Flag award along with Mote Park, Clare Park and Whatman Park.

RESOLVED:

1. That the update on the activities at the Cobtree Manor Estate since the last meeting of the Committee in September 2020 be noted.
2. That the staff at Cobtree Manor Park be thanked for their work in maintaining the Park.

Note: Councillor Perry joined the meeting during consideration of this item (2.17 p.m.). Councillor Perry said that he had no disclosures of interest or lobbying.

132. FUTURE COBTREE MANOR PARK MANAGEMENT AND OPERATION PROPOSAL

The Leisure Manager introduced his report setting out options for the future management and operation of Cobtree Manor Park. It was noted that:

- Until 2017, the 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 and the grounds maintenance service was provided by the Council's in-house Grounds Maintenance team. However, when the Parks and Leisure team was split into two, the operation of the Cobtree Manor Park and the Charity's other assets remained with the Leisure team and the Parks team joined Environmental Services.
- The Leisure Manager had identified limitations regarding the current operational arrangements for Cobtree Manor Park. Three staff were currently employed at the Park, the Cobtree Manager and two Rangers, and their work was restricted by the equipment available to them. A significant proportion of the mechanical work required was, therefore, carried out by the Council's in-house Grounds Maintenance team at an additional cost, or was not undertaken at all. This had an impact on the productivity of the Cobtree team and the value for money offered to the Charity.

- All amenity and bridleway grass cutting works were currently undertaken by the Council's in-house Grounds Maintenance team at an annual cost of £21,600. The team also carried out one-off work including play area repairs and regularly provided additional staff to cover peak times. Therefore, the actual cost to the Charity ranged from £30k to over £50k in addition to the salary costs of the Cobtree Manager and Rangers. It was also important to note that this currently excluded shrub-bed maintenance costs as this work had not been undertaken in recent years. The work would need to be carried out, but it was unlikely that it could be carried out by the Park's staff. This work was estimated to cost £17,000 per year.
- The Head of Environment and Public Realm who was responsible for the Council's parks and open spaces had 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 customer experience.
- In this context, four options had been identified for the onward management and operation of Cobtree Manor Park as follows:
 1. Continue as is
 2. Fully in-house with Cobtree dedicated staff
 3. Fully contracted out
 4. New combined management structure within Parks
- Cost comparisons had been prepared and the current model included a "to be confirmed" cost for the storage and disposal of green waste as the Park did not have a green waste solution at present.
- The option to create a new combined management structure within Parks was considered to offer the Charity the most resilient and flexible service which also provided better value for money than the current arrangements. However, the changes would be more complex than the other options and there would be a full staff consultation and more detailed financial modelling before a final proposal was brought back to the Committee. Informal discussions had already taken place with the staff involved.

In response to questions, the Leisure Manager explained that:

- There was insufficient space to compost green waste on site.
- If option 4 was adopted, it would be possible to assimilate all members of staff in the new structure.

RESOLVED: That agreement be given to the principle of a combined Parks management structure to enable a full staff consultation to be undertaken.

133. 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

Cobtree Estate Contracts Update Report 3 – Financial/Business Affairs

134. COBTREE ESTATE CONTRACTS UPDATE REPORT

The Leisure Manager presented his report providing an update on the implementation of the Committee’s decisions regarding the contractual relief to be provided to the operators of the Cobtree Golf Course, Kent Life and the Cobtree Café to ensure service continuity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was noted that the report was now out of date due to the announcement of a second lockdown for England which would remain in place until 2 December 2020. Further discussions were taking place with operators. A meeting of the Committee would be arranged to take place in December 2020 to enable Members to review the position regarding the Cobtree Estate contracts and to consider the action to be taken.

135. DURATION OF MEETING

2.00 p.m. to 3.10 p.m.