

Ernest Stevens Trusts Management Committee - 18th April 2016

Report of the Strategic Director Place

Bowling Green & Croquet Maintenance

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Trust Management Committee on the challenges facing the management and maintenance of bowling greens and croquet lawns, arising from the reduction in grounds maintenance funding in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and to consider the options that are available moving forward.

Background

2. The Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on February 29th 2016 will see significant reductions in funding for Green Care services over the next few years. As a consequence, officers have been looking at ways the local authority can develop partnerships with groups in order to sustain services which previously have always been provided by the Council.
3. One of the more costly services provided on Community Parks is the maintenance of bowling greens and croquet lawns. This service is heavily subsidised borough wide to the extent of circa £79,000 per annum and the Medium Term Financial Strategy has identified savings in this provision in 2017-18. Officers continue to consult with numerous clubs that use these facilities in the Borough to consider how we can jointly continue to maintain these facilities via community/voluntary sector input at a much lower cost.
4. The proposal to deliver services in partnership with voluntary organisations is in keeping with government initiatives to engage with the local community in the provision of services that support the local environment and Dudley's Community Council objectives.
5. One of the ways in which sports clubs can assist the Council in delivering services would be through entering into a lease agreement for a specific facility. This would enable clubs to access funding not currently available to the Council.
6. The principle of entering into a lease arrangement is not new in that the Council, as Trustee, has received a Scheme from the Charity Commission consenting to the grant of leases.

7. There are a total of six bowling greens and one croquet lawn detailed within the savings proposals. The following sites fall within the remit of the Ernest Stevens Management Committee and contain either bowling green's and/or a croquet lawn.

King George 5th Park, Wordsley

8. Although this site falls outside the Ernest Stevens Trust, it is recognised that it has charitable status and therefore falls under the remit of this committee. There is a parcel of land registered at the Charity Commission with the remainder of this park being subject to the conditions of Fields in Trust. The land which is the subject of the bowling green falls within the Fields in Trust part of this park. Details of the process of obtaining consent of Fields in Trust will be provided to the Committee at a later stage.
9. The bowling green at King George 5th Park, Wordsley, is currently not being used for bowling. The fact that no toilets are available for the club to use has had a big impact on the people who used to play there. The Friends of the Park would like to develop alternative uses for this space.
10. The Friends of the Park are proposing to develop a skate park facility on the bowling green which could potentially involve an asset transfer arrangement, with the group picking up the responsibility for management and maintenance. This type of arrangement would enable the group to bid for grant funding to support their proposals.

Stevens Park Wollescote,

11. At Wollescote Park, there are two bowling green's. The crown green in front of Wollescote Hall provides weekly games for the Sons of Rest Club which operates from the hall. This club provides a small amount of revenue for the maintenance of the greens via the Council's fees and charges.
12. There is also a very well played flat green bowling facility behind Wollescote Hall, which is also let on an annual basis through the Council's fees and charges to three different clubs, providing some revenue to assist in the maintenance of the green. Both of these facilities are also available to the public for occasional use.
13. There has been considerable investment over the years from the flat green clubs, they have improved the playing surface and have acquired a grant from the local authority to place a small bowls pavilion in the walled garden which they manage successfully. This bowls pavilion is granted on an annual license agreement with the Council. These voluntary sector developments have allowed Wollescote Park's sports facilities to operate successfully with considerable volunteer input. The volunteers provide security of the walled garden, tennis courts and changing rooms, opening and closing the gates when there is high demand for these facilities. The volunteers deliver the services which a park keeper previously provided.
14. These active volunteers have now outgrown their small bowls pavilion and they have aspirations to build a much larger pavilion on the site which would allow them to operate over the winter using indoor bowls mats. The group's aspirations would require a long-term lease to be developed so that they could benefit from the external grants which are available for voluntary sector bodies.

15. There is considerable interest from the clubs to take on the management of the green through an asset transfer arrangement which would enable them to bid for grant funding to support their development proposals.

Mary Stevens Park, Stourbridge

16. At Mary Stevens Park there is a crown green which is regularly used by the Sons of Rest Club based in the park, but other smaller clubs also play here. There is also a croquet green adjacent to the bowling green which is used by Stourbridge Croquet Club. The croquet lawn suffers considerable abuse by park users during the summer months, impacting directly on the condition of the playing surface. These clubs provide a small amount of revenue for the maintenance of the greens via the Council's fees and charges.
17. It is acknowledged that additional security would benefit these greens, however this cannot be delivered by the Council given the current financial challenges.
18. As part of the Heritage Lottery Funded project, new bowling and croquet huts have been installed on the site, providing better shelter and opportunities for refreshments for the teams who play there. These facilities are also available to the public for occasional use.

Bowling Green Maintenance

19. The Council is seeking to reduce its budget for bowling greens and croquet lawns by £79,000 per year. However, in order to continue to supply bowling facilities in these parks, officers have been meeting with clubs to discuss a variety of options that are available.
20. Some of the clubs are keen to work with the local authority and to take on the management of the bowling greens in an asset transfer arrangement, whereby the club becomes responsible for managing the site. The club would have to provide opportunities for casual play on the greens and not be exclusive to club members only.
21. These arrangements are already being progressed with Dudley Sports Bowling Club in Kingswinford and bowlers at Huntingtree Park, Halesowen. It should also be noted that these parks are not subject to any trust
22. The Black Country Bowls Club has expressed interest for potential asset transfer of the flat green at Wollescote Park. Advantages of a lease arrangement would mean that the club could also bid for external funding for their pavilion upgrade project and other improvements to the facilities to the overall benefit of the park and its users.
23. Whilst it is acknowledged that other bowling clubs are not keen to enter into an arrangement to take on board responsibility for the management and maintenance of their respective greens, the Council can no longer continue to subsidise bowling green maintenance so would have to consider other options to meet the required savings approved by Council. These options are:

Option 1

24. To increase the fee payable to the Council for the use of these facilities. The current fees are heavily subsidised and do not represent full cost recovery for ongoing maintenance. In these times of austerity the Council would have to consider a significant increase in the fee for bowling activities.

Option 2

25. A combination of an increase in fees and assistance with maintenance from the clubs. This may suit some clubs whereby they offer support for maintaining the green through regular work parties when the maintenance tasks are very intense during the height of the summer. Clubs could also raise funds through fundraising events and club activities to fund additional maintenance services from the Council or from a third party provider.
26. The average cost of bowling on Council greens for club members is between £5 and £20 per year depending on the number of members per club (some clubs have between 50 to 60 members) Senior citizens pay the Council £15.96 per year for an individual season ticket. This represents approx 60p per game on average. Research suggests that most club memberships range from £75 - £150 per member for the season. Most Councils charge £2.00 - £3.00 per game for senior citizens. It has been suggested that these sorts of fees would be much more reasonable and would reduce the subsidy considerably.

Option 3

27. To significantly reduce maintenance operations and grass cutting to a minimum number of cuts per year. The Council is very concerned about closing greens entirely. Dudley, like many council's, has lost many bowling greens in parks during the 1980s and 90s. Whilst this would seek to maintain opportunity for recreational bowling, the surface may not be suitable for a higher level standard of bowling.
28. In respect of Option 3, members of this committee are asked to consider the details of the respective Deed of Gift. It has been suggested that as a consequence of the Deed of Gift for the Stevens Parks, the Council as Trustee is tied to maintaining the greens. **The deed for Wollescote Park states:**

"That the land will be forever maintained as public park and recreation ground in good ornamental cultivation condition and repair",

and that "the Lawns attached to Wollescote Hall may be appropriated and used for the purpose of playing tennis, bowls and croquet."

"The Council shall keep the grassland mown and or closely grazed by sheep"

"The Council shall keep the lawns, fruit trees and garden land in a cultivated, clean and tidy condition"

The Council shall be at liberty from time to time to make such reasonable charge or charges as it may determine for the use by adults of a portion or portions of the Parks and Recreation Grounds for Golf, Cricket, Football, Hockey, Tennis, Bowls,

Croquet, Boating, Swimming and or other games and recreations approved by the Council'

'The Council shall be at liberty from time to time to make such bye-laws and regulations governing the use of the Buildings the Parks and Recreation Grounds as it may think proper such bye-laws and regulations being consistent with the covenants and conditions herein set forth'

The Council shall be responsible for the whole cost of carrying out the conditions herein set forth and anything arising thereout and also for the maintenance upkeep and control of the premises hereby assured but it shall be at full liberty to levy a rate or raise funds for this purpose by subscription or otherwise as it may think fit'

The deed for Mary Stevens Park states:

"The corporation shall be at liberty from time-to-time to make such reasonable charges as it may determine for the use of the park for tennis, bowls, boating, swimming and or other games."

"Provision shall be made by the corporation for the playing of games (which shall include tennis and bowls) by people of small means at the lowest possible charge"

'The Corporation shall be responsible for the whole cost of carrying out the conditions herein set forth and anything arising thereout and also for the maintenance upkeep and control of the premises hereby assured but it shall be at full liberty to levy a rate or raise funds for this purpose by subscription or otherwise as it may think fit'

The provision for the Council from time to time to make such bye-laws and regulations as per Wollescote Park applies to Mary Stevens Park.

The Deed of Gift does not tie the Council into maintaining the bowling green or detail specific standards of maintenance. Equally it does not stipulate who should provide this service, only that the Council makes provision. It is therefore recommended that the Trustees consider the other options highlighted above for the future provision of this service.

Finance

29. Like most public sector organisations, the future delivery of a number of services will be dependent on the voluntary sector. This is reflected within the Community Council agenda. The Medium Term Financial Strategy will be very difficult to implement if the Authority cannot engage successfully with other partners. Services could be lost completely if these partnerships are not developed quickly.
30. The Medium Term Financial Strategy has identified £79,000 savings in relation to bowling greens (the difference between the cost of maintenance and the income generated) and has identified further savings related to improving income targets.
31. Failure to deliver these savings will compromise the Council's medium-term financial plan and impact on essential services.

Law

32. Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 which provides Councils with the general power of competence to do anything that individuals generally may do, subject to Sections 2 to 4, and Section 105, 117-123 of the Charities Act 2011 which gives power to authorise dealings with charity property. Section 117 (3)(d) provides that the Council, as Trustees, can grant a lease to any beneficiary otherwise than for the best rent that can reasonably be obtained and that is intended to enable the demised premises to be occupied for the purposes, or any particular purpose of the charity.

Equality Impact

33. Our parks and open spaces provide an essential environment for all sectors of the community to engage and prosper.

Recommendations

34. The Committee considers the aspirations of the voluntary sector partners who have a strong desire to improve facilities at these parks.
35. The Committee supports the principle of transferring management and control of some areas of the parks to third parties.
36. The Committee supports exploring and developing partnership arrangements with the clubs who play on the greens and supports improving the current financial position by seeking to reduce or eliminate the current Council subsidies which deliver bowling and croquet greens.
37. The Committee further considers a way forward based on the information contained in this report, further consultation process together with the provisions of the Deeds of Gift and any necessary scheme/consent of the Charity Commission together with legislation referred to above.



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