

SUBJECT:	MANAGING PUBLIC OPEN SPACE
MEETING:	Strong Communities Select Committee
DATE:	16th June 2016
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	All

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To seek the Committee's views on the proposal for an inclusive and engaging review which will determine Monmouthshire's future strategy for managing and maintaining MCC owned public open space.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Committee note and provide comments on:

- i. The purpose of the review;
- ii. The key workstreams of the review; and
- iii. The proposed timescales.

3. KEY ISSUES:

MCC's Open Space

- 3.1 Monmouthshire County Council owns and manages a range of open space of which equates to approximately 4'030'000m² plus a number of countryside and heritage sites, which are maintained predominantly by either Grounds Maintenance, based within Waste & Street Services/Operations directorate or Tourism Leisure & Culture in the Enterprise Directorate. Public open space as part of this review is the over-arching term for:
- a) Parks including green space and park infrastructure
 - b) Cemeteries
 - c) High way verges
 - d) Green space around car parks
 - e) Land around Museums / Attractions
 - f) Picnic Areas
 - g) Country parks and countryside access sites
 - h) Green open space in housing developments that MCC has adopted.

There are certain designations that relate to areas of public open space that the review needs to be mindful of as their designations stipulate the opportunity the Council may or may not have with that land:

- Public Open Space – Restrictions on sale as would be identified within the Public Open Spaces Act 1906.
- Village Green / Commons – Restrictions regarding Village Green / Common Status
- Fields in Trust Status or other restricted covenants / agreements.
- Amenity and Recreational Land – Local Development Plan Policies.
- Country Park Status - under the Countryside Act 1968.
- Other designations, including Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Local Wildlife Site status etc.

3.2 Monmouthshire is a beautiful county and our green public open space adds value in so many ways to the well-being of our communities. Well cared for green infrastructure is a local community asset and can be used for meeting multiple social and environmental goals e.g. local sports, social inclusion e.g. parent meetings, space for play, local events for income purposes or wider tourism benefits for our businesses, strategic biodiversity outcomes, and promotion of volunteering and creating support networks for our aging population.

3.3 There are proven links to access to green space and physical and mental health, and the link between well managed open space to wider biodiversity outcomes in terms of stemming species and plant decline is well documented. Our open space is therefore so much more than just something people visit and enjoy and we maintain. We are custodians of a major public asset, no matter how small the plot of land may be, and we are entrusted to review what we do and how we do it, to adapt to modern practices and ensure our actions deliver short and long term outcomes.

3.4 The Council has an established policy approach to maximise the health and well-being benefits from well planned, designed and managed green infrastructure including the Local Development Plan policy and Green Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Guidance / action plan.

3.5 A recent report undertaken by Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery identifies that public parks are under threat with cuts of 60% or more coming forward as Councils wrestle with balancing austerity measures whilst keeping these vital spaces of community green infrastructure open. Monmouthshire does not want to be in that space and wants to proactively review with Members, our partners and our communities what we do and how we can work together differently to deliver the outcomes so appreciated and valued by our residents.

Grounds Maintenance Background

3.6 The work undertaken by Grounds Maintenance has evolved over time and has not been fully codified since 1991 with the award of the then Monmouth Borough and also 1996 at

the time of Local Government reorganisation of which incorporated MBC, GCC & BG these were three contracts which determined what works were done, at what locations and for what value. Overtime pieces of land have been added or deleted and operational maintenance schedules have been amended as a result. However the bill of quantities once relied on to inform spend no longer aligns to the budget allocated by the Council resulting in a need to strategically review what works are undertaken, where, how, by how many and for what cost.

- 3.7 The restructure within WSS over 2014-15 also allowed investment in modernisation and the digitising of all the records the service held. This work was also a priority with the digitisation of the MHA maintenance contract which contributes over £250k of income to the service. In time the digitisation will be used to move from a paper based service to a fully IT enabled service for tracking of works issued, completed both for internal performance monitoring and external client compliance.
- 3.8 Grounds maintenance has a core budget of £1.4m and employs 60 operational staff and this is supported by a team of 8 including front line supervisors. The staff are based over 3 depots – Llanfoist, Monmouth and Caldicot. The front line working patterns is different to most staff as they work 43 hours per week Mar – Oct with hours reducing in the winter in recognition that in the Spring and Summer months grass cutting is a primary activity for the service. The annual equivalent though is 37 hours per week. This paper does not discuss proposals for change as the consultation and engagement needs to run its course to determine if there are any changes that the service needs to make to improve outcomes.

Tourism Leisure and Culture Background

- 3.9 Tourism Leisure and Culture manage a mixed portfolio of countryside, heritage, leisure and tourism sites, including greenspace at major visitor sites, scheduled ancient monuments, countryside access / recreation sites, woodland and meadows. Many of them are associated with other countryside access or heritage infrastructure, e.g. Wales Coast Path or visitor attractions.
- 3.10 Some of these sites are managed by agricultural or other licences, some directly managed and some maintained by Grounds Maintenance. As with Grounds Maintenance the portfolio comprises a mixture of sites which has developed over time and have various current maintenance and management regimes. Management responsibility are spread across facility managers for leisure, attraction and outdoor education sites and the Countryside service manage their direct sites with very limited warden resources (2 staff).

The Review

- 3.11 The proposed aims for the review are:

- To ensure Monmouthshire residents and visitors are able to enjoy access to high quality public open space

- To have a clear strategy for the future of public open space maximising its use to promote wider health, community and environmental outcomes
- That the strategy is developed and implemented with and for communities and stakeholders
- For MCC to have a clear funding and investment strategy for managing public open space

3.12 The proposed objectives for the review are:

- To clearly map out the open space currently being maintained by Monmouthshire County Council – on its own or in partnership with others
- To clearly identify the costs (people, equipment, vehicles etc.) MCC currently incurs maintaining public open space
- To engage fully with communities and stakeholders on proposals for how public space is to be managed in the future
- To identify other funding streams or different delivery structures e.g. new partnerships to ensure strategic outcomes for public open space are achieved
- To identify how we can best support ongoing community and voluntary involvement
- To determine future core MCC funding to maintaining public space
- To identify opportunities to encourage and facilitate opportunities for the active use of greenspaces to provide health and well-being benefits

3.13 MCC already has a plethora of strong partnerships and community action regarding maintenance of public open space. This work wants to celebrate their activity, look at how we can learn from and build on it, and understand what else we can do.

The Review Process

3.14 The review is split into three distinct stages which will run concurrently and be brought together at the end of the process:

(a) *Digitisation and Reviewing Schedules & Internal Optimisation*

3.15 The work digitising current activity is almost complete. Aligned to this officers will have electronic based schedules of what needs to be done and at what frequency which directly details the works our operatives do on a daily basis. At the end of this workstream ward level maps will be produced, which are colour coded which will indicate the designation of land and back ground detail will be available on what is done to maintain that space. A demonstration of a map will be provided to Committee Members at the meeting. Other existing datasets will also be utilised including open space, ecological connectivity, accessible natural greenspace studies and pollinators action plan.

3.16 This is a joint exercise between two departments. Over time they have been together, split up and then re-married through various iterations of restructures. This has resulted in at times decisions being made which to current practice make no operational sense e.g.

Grounds re-charge Countryside e.g. maintenance of Usk Island and Caldicot Castle, in addition to other areas on an annual basis. Over the summer and with the publishing of the maps a strategic discussion about how we work better together and internally more efficiently can be undertaken to enable both services to plan effectively for the future.

(b) *Consultation & Engagement*

- 3.17 For this review to deliver robust short and long term outcomes the views of local Councillors, Town and Community Groups, Friends groups and any other user of the space are central to MCC understanding what people think of what we do and the quality/provision of the public open space in local communities. This is the most important part of this review.
- 3.18 It is proposed that the consultation will be launched w/c 25th July with County Councillors. Ward level maps will be produced and shared with Members. We propose publishing the maps on the 1st floor landing. As it is Council week officers will make themselves available in Usk for the week to answer any questions Members may have on activities within their area. A questionnaire will also be developed to quantify Members views on the quality of service currently received, the provision of space within your communities, views on local/groups that MCC could partner with, the potential for more community action and support MCC needs to provide.
- 3.19 Following this engagement officers will engage with Town and Community Councils, all relevant partners e.g. Greenfingers and local groups (e.g. Friends Groups) with the same set of questions as given to MCC Members. The consultation process will provide the following information for review:
- Views on quality of the service currently provided
 - What outcomes the service delivers strongly against and others that require improvement or refocus
 - Whether and how the service could be done differently
 - The strength of community action for partnering
- 3.20 Public consultation will also be an important feature. Work will be undertaken with corporate communications colleagues to design a suitably engaging framework for seeking views on the future of our open space. Approaches will include:- press article call to action, web site survey, social media presence, posters in public buildings etc.

(c) *Understanding Our Resource Base and Finding New Resources*

- 3.21 This paper so far has not linked the review to the MTFP and savings proposals arguing that the review needs to be seen in a more strategic and holistic context. Over recent years Grounds Maintenance has made significant savings with the adoption of the pollinator policy and a change in direction for verge maintenance. Changes in operational efficiency with the merger with waste/cleansing in 2014/15 resulted in a new approach to local environmental quality maintenance with grounds colleagues reducing operational

duplication and providing a more localised focused service for clean ups and responses to fly-tipping. Tourism, Leisure and Culture has restructured to provide efficiency savings and there is reduced capacity within countryside to support site management, partly as the loss of external grant.

- 3.22 However we cannot undertake this work in a vacuum and the Review needs to assess whether savings can be achieved from MCC not necessarily reducing provision, but by changing the way we work. Because Grounds Maintenance is also a commercial operation we have a full understanding of our external cost base. The same commercial rigour is to be applied to our internal practices to ensure we are delivering efficient and effective services and identify whether and how any improvements can be made.
- 3.23 As the work to examine and develop an alternative delivery model for Tourism, Leisure and Culture and associated services progresses the Review will contribute to identifying those sites and activities that would be most effectively managed in the future through the new delivery model or how best MCC can work effectively with the new body to deliver jointly agreed outcomes.
- 3.24 We will fully map the local resources and assets that have been mobilised and determine where there are any gaps in provision and what MCC can do, through its Volunteering Strategy to support local growth. We need to engage with delivery partners such as Green Fingers to determine their aspirations for the future, learn the lessons from their first year maintaining Linda Vista and whether they are interested in growth and working in new areas. We need to engage with Town and Community Councils to determine their views on land, understand their priorities for the future and how we can work constructively together. Budget Mandate no.21 in 2016-17 identified £55,000 that could come forward from Abergavenny and Monmouth TCCs for Bailey Park and Chippenham Mead respectively. The TCCs did not come forward with funding to support the ongoing maintenance of these two parks and the budget has been reduced as a result. Due to the strategic nature of the sites it was determined by the service that reducing maintenance to force the TCCs hand would be counter-productive and operationally more inefficient. Therefore two vacancies have not been filled to mitigate this pressure rather than reduce service provision for these sites.
- 3.25 We must also over this period look at other income streams or how we can do things differently. The research by Nesta demonstrated the opportunity for investment in parks from benefactors and endowments. We do not know if this is possible in Monmouthshire unless we look into it. Whilst we do not want to cover our parks in advertising there are subtle and innovative ways of bringing in income to reduce our costs e.g. flower bed displays, electronic advertising displays (solar panelled) etc. We need to explore whether there are small pockets of land which could be sold or managed differently and what processes MCC can put in place to bring in this income and reduce expenditure.

Bringing it all together – timescales

3.26 The above workstreams will be managed by officers and brought together in the autumn to develop proposals for Select to consider prior to Cabinet. It is envisaged a long term strategy will be developed with short, medium and long term actions identified with a strategic purpose for the service and our partnership with our communities defined.

3.27 Proposed timescales are:

Date	Action
Prior to July 25 th	Finalising of maps and detail of activity undertaken by MCC.
25/07/16	Launch of consultation with County Councillors – officers will be available on the 1 st floor landing, Usk for member engagement
25/07/16	Communications out to public, partners and TCCs to seek their views, invite ourselves to meetings, place questionnaire on line
July-Aug	Officers lead consultation and proactively seek comments from communities and partners
Jul-Aug	Research into realistic alternative options for income generation and internal financial review and tidying up between services
September	Bringing findings together and determination of short and long term actions and social, financial and environmental impact of each action
15/09/16	Strong Communities Select Committee receive a high level presentation on the findings of the review. Given timescales of the consultation it is proposed a presentation be given at the meeting and Members then given the opportunity to provide comments by 22/09/16 to feed into the Cabinet report
05/10/16	Cabinet report – findings fed into MTFP

4. Conclusion

4.1 Members are asked to comment on the:

- Proposed aims and objectives of the review
- The proposed workstreams; and
- The timescales proposed.

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