

AGENDA 12, Enc viii) Report of Meeting at Hirst Park, held on Wednesday 29th November, at 2:00pm

Present

Cllr Pauline Thompson (Chair), Cllr Louis Brown, Neil Dawson - NCC Countryside and Green Spaces Manager, Jimmy Reith – Parks and Green Spaces Team Leader, Peter Bowman, NCC Senior Team Leader Ashington, Michael Bryant – NCC Neighbourhood Services, Carla Thompson – Hirst Co-ordinator, Sarah Eden - ATC Town Clerk

Apologies

County Cllr Ken Parry, Cllr Vicki Brown, Cllr Marjorie Chambers

Objectives of the meeting

- 1) Review the required inputs to properly manage and maintain Hirst Park to an agreed standard. This includes maintenance of play areas, sports facilities, grounds, reactive repairs, events, volunteering, etc.
- 2) Outline the resources and investments NCC is committing to deliver these inputs as the responsible body for the park.
- 3) Identify any gaps between required inputs and NCC's committed resources.

1) Required Inputs

The tasks set out in the original MOU are still applicable in regard to play inspections and maintenance, general maintenance, cleansing, gardening, toilets, bowling greens and reactive work.

In respect of the new PlayZone (not yet installed), this is not expected to generate any additional work and the bookings system is being led by Ian Stephenson at NCC NCT.

Events are expected to be supported by Carla in her role as Hirst Co-ordinator and Heart of Hirst and others including the Town Council, will continue to liaise with Carla about availability and joined up community events and activities.

Some signed-up volunteers have moved to Full Circle, those working informally on litter picking will continue in their own time informally.

Reactive works are significant in response to vandalism, and it is noted that seat maintenance has not been carried out.

The responsibilities under park maintenance are very difficult to achieve with the current resource, which is one full-time operative (Band 3), and an additional seasonal operative (Band 3) for 7 months from April – October (3 weekdays/weekend), and off-season attendance by NEAT.

At the commencement of the MOU this was valued at £43,997, of which Ashington Town Council agreed to contribute a capped rate of £23,680.

2) NCC Resources/Investments

It was discussed that recruitment for a seasonal operative should be specific including an emphasis on gardening and not the same as a general Band 3 operative. It is expected this will make a significant difference.

The Probation Service provide a supervised team ranging from 1 -10 people on a weekly basis and will continue to do so whilst there is work available, workers are skilled in aspects of park maintenance. This increased to twice/weekly when work was not available at other NCC parks. It is suggested that seats are included in this work in the spring.

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The current resource input by NCC is valued at £60,275 which includes one full-time operative (Band 4), and an additional seasonal operative (Band 3) for 7 months from April – October (3 weekdays/weekend), in addition to off-season attendance by NEAT.

The preferred option put forward for the resource required is one full-time operative (Band 4), and one full-time operative (Band 3) (4 weekdays/1 weekend). This resource including additional costs is £72,946.

Having x2 operatives* all year round would allow a lot of preparation work to be carried out in the winter. Additionally, having that additional pair of hands would allow planned jobs to be carried out at the same time as reactive works which often have to be prioritised.

3) Gaps in Resource

Presently ATC contribute a capped rate of £23,680 for the £60,275 resource. This is more or less a 40/60 ratio with NCC budgeting £36,595.

The preferred option outlined above (value = £72,946) would require a resource input of £36,351 from Ashington Town Council to NCC's £36,595, so only slightly less than 50%.

Summary

In summary, the key objectives of the meeting were reviewed and there was open discussion around the resources required to properly maintain Hirst Park to an agreed standard. The tasks set out in the original MOU are still applicable.

While NCC has committed increased resources to park maintenance, valued at £60,275, there are still gaps to meet the preferred resourcing level of one full-time and one full-time seasonal operative. This preferred option is costed at £72,946.

To meet this level, the Town Council would need to increase their contribution from the current capped rate of £23,680 to £36,351, representing a slight decrease to just under 50% of the total cost. This increased investment from both parties would allow for more proactive maintenance and preparation work during winter months, whilst also having capacity to handle reactive works. This input better reflects the responsibilities.

The budget constraints of Ashington Town Council were highlighted, namely that there was very little opportunity for further investment without something else being reduced, or a rise in the precept.

Conclusion

Whilst additional commitments have been made by NCC, further investment is needed from the Town Council to meet the desired staffing level that can elevate park maintenance standards year-round. The meeting allowed productive discussions between stakeholders to align on objectives, costs and reach consensus on a practical way forward.

The report will be presented to Ashington Town Council in advance of budget decisions being made.

*After the meeting it was pointed out that it would be difficult to appoint a permanent member of staff if the agreement was only year-to-year and NCC may only be able to offer a fixed-term contract if that was the case.