

Agenda Item No:

Report To: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 27th July 2023

Report Title: Ashford Parks Foundation

Report Author: Roger Batho, HLF Project Manager
Job Title: James Laidlaw, Operations Manager

Reporting to: Jo Fox, Assistant Director of Environment, Property & Recreation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Kate Walder
Portfolio Holder for: Cabinet Member for Recreation and Public Spaces



Summary: The report is to update the Cabinet on the position of the 5.1M National Heritage Lottery Funded (NLHF) project in Victoria Park (figure inclusive of uplift, contingencies, and separate British Cycling Pump Track works). It seeks to set up an Officer and Member Task and Finish Group to further explore, investigate and understand the feasibility, practicality and financial implications of delivering an Ashford Parks Foundations. In order to achieve this it seeks to extend the employment of the HLF project manager to lead on this work.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: Victoria Ward

Recommendations: The Cabinet is recommended to:-

- I. Note the delivery of the National Lottery Heritage Funded (NLHF) capital project at Victoria Report
- II. To agree to extend the employment of the HLF Project Manager from December 2023 to 30 April 2024 in order to lead and report on a feasibility study for the potential of an Ashford Parks Foundation and to provide continuity with volunteer groups to continue required the legacy works
- III. To commit to an Officer and cross party Member Task and Finish group to explore the viability of an Ashford Parks Foundation

Policy Overview:	To be developed and reported back to Cabinet in subsequent reports.
Financial Implications:	The salary for the extension of employment of the HLF Project Manager has been costed and allowed for in the base budget following a restructure of the Environment, Property & Recreation Team. No further financial impacts identified during the feasibility study period.
Legal Implications:	None identified at this point. A member of the Legal Services team will play an integral part of the Task and Finish group to advise on any legal implications arising.
Equalities Impact Assessment:	Not Required at this stage.
Data Protection Impact Assessment:	Discussions have been had and will continue to be had with the Data Protection team, who are available to aid with any necessary data protection arrangements including but not limited to, any necessary Data Protection Impact Assessments, appropriate privacy notices, processing clauses in any necessary contractual arrangements and general data protection advice to ensure compliance.
Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):	The risk assessment will be developed as part of the feasibility study. However it should be noted that if the Parks Foundation is not viable or does not go ahead there is still a requirement on ABC to provide a legacy and the maintenance of Victoria Park as part of the NLHF Funding agreement.
Sustainability Implications:	<p>This proposal will have a positive impact on sustainability, both in terms of continuity of green asset/service management, and towards the Council's climate change ambitions.</p> <p>Creating the Ashford Parks Foundation will present new funding opportunities that are unavailable directly to Ashford Borough Council. This will include additional resource for the continuous development and improvement of the Borough's open spaces. The Foundation also supports the Council's ambitions for achieving Net Zero (as set out in the Climate Action Strategy and Plan) within its core purposes.</p>
Other Material Implications:	None
Exempt from Publication:	No

**Background
Papers:**

**Victoria Park – Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People
Bid** – Cabinet report 6th December 2018 [Victoria Park -
Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People Bid.pdf](#)
([modern.gov.co.uk](#))

Contact:

Roger.batho@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330444
[James.laidlaw@ashford.gov.uk](#) - Tel (01233) 330346

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Introduction and Background

1. Ashford Borough Council (ABC) are in a position to restructure their approach to the strategic management and development of open spaces. A number of converging factors and work streams present the opportunity to reimagine.

Victoria Park

2. ABC are working in partnership with the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) to deliver £5.1m improvement project in Victoria Park (figure inclusive of uplift, contingencies, and separate British Cycling pump track works) which is scheduled to complete in autumn 2023. These include a new café, refurbished toilets and nursery, a new playground, sensory garden, seasonal



The old nursery and public toilets.



Works are almost complete on the new building and playground.

wetland, and a new improved bike track.

3. Throughout the delivery of the project there has been a complementary and extensive activity programme aimed at engaging the community with the park in order to build a proactive audience for the upgraded facilities once they are in place. These events have been well received and have shown that there is a genuine appetite for events and engagement. Highlights include the Christmas Fair, Wassailing, Harry Potter book trail, Scarecrow trails, the Mystery of the Missing Stags, and Mr Harpers Fantastical Fountain.



4. Should a more formal legacy arrangement be agreed after the end of the project the events which have presented the best opportunities to be developed commercially are Mr Harper's Day in July and Wassailing linking into the significant local apple-growing heritage along with the popular Christmas Fair. The Friends of Victoria Park are hoping to take on the continued delivery of the annual Easter trail and the autumn scarecrow trail, both of which were popular locally and more than manageable for a community group such as themselves.

5. Part of ABC's agreement with NLHF is to secure the legacy of the project by pursuing a Green Flag Award for Victoria Park, and sustaining future arrangements for the ongoing management of the space along with the engagement of the local community.
6. Further to the group of conservation-focused volunteers there are also enthusiastic and skilled individuals who would like to pursue opportunities around gardening, heritage and trees in Victoria Park.
7. Victoria Park has a dedicated full-time Park Keeper, which is currently supported by NLHF funding, with provision for this post to be funded from the General Fund base budget moving forward. The Park is also very fortunate to have an established Friends group with a passion for conservation and improving wildlife value across the park. Building on the legacy of the project must be our key aim and aligns with ABC's Corporate Plan theme of Green Pioneer. The momentum of community support and the experience of the project team offer opportunities to explore a different delivery model in the form of a Parks Foundation.

Open Space Development

8. Following the amalgamation of Environment Property and Recreation (EP&R) services there have been a number of changes to roles and responsibilities where overlap and synergies have been identified and where vacancies have arisen we have taken the opportunity to review and re-align roles rather than replacing like for like posts. Following a review it is clear that a resource is required to support the ongoing development and shaping of our parks and open space across the borough. This also presents the opportunity to restructure and exploit the social and economic benefits of these assets, whilst engaging with our communities and aligning more closely with the management and maintenance of open spaces (as delivered by Aspire) and the work to improve and capture value from these spaces.

Pressures and New Models

9. NESTA and the National Lottery partnered in 2012 to deliver their Rethinking Parks innovation programme which sought new ways of financing and managing parks whilst local government was facing up to the challenges of austerity economics. Locally, ABC are on a transformational journey in response to the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and more broadly the ongoing funding of the management and development of non-statutory services, such as open space provision, is a challenge being faced across the local government sector.
10. One of the ideas these partnerships have more successfully trialled is that of Parks Foundations. These are non-profit (normally charity) organisations which focus on "additionality" in parks and open spaces; they do not get involved with day-to-day management and maintenance, but lead fundraising efforts, deliver improvement projects, and manage community volunteering and events.

11. Parks Foundations are common in Europe and the US, but are a relatively new model in the UK. Since the start of the Rethinking Parks trial there are now approximately a dozen Foundations across the UK, each of which differ in structure and focus. The most notable example is the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Parks Foundation which has been established for ten years and generated an additional £650,000 of income for its parks in 2021-22.

Reshaping Ashford

12. Ashford's "Big 8" development projects have transformed the population and the economics of the Borough in a generation. The town's principal residential developments will be responsible for a population growth of almost 20,000 over the next 20 years, and projects such as Newtown Works and Project Green will bring new prosperity to the town. Open Spaces, and how and where these new residents and workers choose to spend their leisure time will have an equally significant impact. The strategic development of Ashford's open spaces is essential to make sure they not only reflect the existing heritage and character of the Borough but also cater for the needs and preferences of its growing communities and the health and wellbeing of our residents.

Proposal

13. It is proposed that work is undertaken to investigate and understand the feasibility, practicality and implications of setting up an Ashford parks foundation. The scope of this will include:
 - a. Risk benefit analysis,
 - b. Legal consultation,
 - c. Collating feedback for parks' Friends' groups
 - d. Lessons learned from other Local Authorities
 - e. Equalities impact assessment
 - f. Review of the process to register a charity
 - g. Recommendations for:
 - i. Type of charity structure
 - ii. Staffing structure
 - iii. Workflow
 - iv. Resourcing,
 - v. Objectives and KPIs
 - vi. Three-year plan
 - h. Draft constitution.
14. A cross-party of Members and officers Task and Finish Group will be established to direct the work. There are three open spaces posts that have been costed into the EP&R restructure and as these remain undefined and vacant, the contract for the Victoria Park Project Manager is requested to be extended to the end of 2023/24 to lead on the delivery of this work and any subsequent outcomes, alongside their duties to complete and closedown the project. This post will also support the volunteer groups to maintain continuity throughout the Autumn and Winter months whilst projects are delivered in the park. This is an opportunity for the Task and Finish group to shape the future of Victoria Park with the view of expanding to further open spaces within the Borough.

15. It is anticipated that a 6 month period is required to conduct an evidence based fully informed feasibility with sufficient time to engage with the Task and Finish Group. The outcomes will therefore be reported back to Cabinet in January 2024.

Equalities Impact Assessment

16. An equalities impact assessment will be carried out as part of the proposal made in this paper, and included in the report back to Cabinet in January 2024.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

17. No formal consultations are planned at this stage, although feedback and comments will be sought from partners, including established Friends of groups and specialist colleagues. Consultation will be informed by the Task and Finish group.

Other Options Considered

18. Other options will be considered alongside exploring the setting up of the Ashford Parks foundation including recruiting to vacant posts to manage open space forward delivery without setting up a Parks Foundation.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

19. This recommendation will allow time to explore an option that could not only manage but develop and enhance Victoria Park with the opportunity to widen this to further parks within the Borough. This will provide an evidence based risk assessment on this and other options for Cabinet to consider in January 2024.

Next Steps in Process

20. To set up an Officer and Member Task and Finish Group that will follow and cover all areas noted within the proposal at point 11 within the report.

Conclusion

21. The NHLF funding has delivered the foundations for there to be great open space at Victoria Park. The exploration of an Ashford Parks Foundation provides an opportunity to build on these foundations for a sustainable future for all to enjoy.

Portfolio Holder's Views

“National Lottery Heritage Funding has enabled ABC to embark on an ambitious programme of capital works for Victoria Park. These are now almost finished. We

must now work on securing the Park's legacy and its future sustainability. An Ashford Parks Foundation could potentially deliver on these ambitions. I would therefore ask my colleagues to support the proposal to establish and resource an Officer & Member Task & Finish Group to examine and interrogate these proposals to ensure the very best results for this much-loved community asset." - Cllr Kate Walder, Cabinet Member for Recreation and Open Spaces.

Contact and Email

22. Roger Batho, HLF Victoria Park Project Manager, Tel 01233 330444
Email: roger.batho@ashford.gov.uk

James Laidlaw, Operations Manager, Tel 01233 330346
Email: james.laidlaw@ashford.gov.uk