

CABINET
4 DECEMBER 2014

DARTFORD MARSHES

Littlebrook

1. Summary

1.1 To advise Members of a study that has been carried out into future maintenance and enhancement options for the Dartford Marshes and to seek approval for various works to be carried out.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Members note the content of this report and approve the implementation of the works as set out in para 3.5 of the report.

2.2 That Members note the budget situation stated in para 3.6 of the report and approve the proposal for how the works will be funded.

2.3 That Members authorise officers to seek contributions and input from other interested parties for these and other related works.

3. Background and Discussion

3.1. The Dartford Marshes lie in the North West corner of the Borough with boundaries along Bob Dunn Way, the River Darent, the Thames and the Bridge development. The area has a number of landowners; the Council owns the largest part which stretches from Binnie Road to the Thames. The Council's land is in two distinct and interesting parts; the south part is dry rough grassland (the part formerly occupied by the Joyce Green Hospital) and the part to the north and east is wet grassland (the actual marsh). These areas support a large and diverse range of plants and wildlife, such as bees, birds and water-voles.

3.2. The Marshes area is subject to a variety of uses, some authorised, some not. Part of the land is used by a gun club and another part is used by a motorbike scrambling club. Joyce Green Farm covers a large area. There is an old orchard and an old disused allotment on site. The area suffers from a general lack of management and care and certain parts are often flytipped and littered. Some unauthorised motorbike and quad-bike usage regularly occurs. Despite this, many people already walk or cycle the area, especially the old cobbled path out to the Thames and the Thames foreshore itself. Precise numbers of users are not known and although this varies according to the time of year, the number would appear to be quite high and include local people and those who travel to get there.

3.3. The Marshes have been subject to a variety of works in recent times including the restoration of the cobbled path, the removal of scrub and the return of some areas to grazing land. These works have been carried out as individual projects. There has been no real maintenance

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or development plan for the part owned by the Council and the area has suffered from a lack of continuity.

- 3.4. In 2013, the Council commissioned Martin Hall (the former director of Greening the Gateway Kent and Medway) to carry out a study into The Marshes. His brief was to revisit its recent history, evaluate its current condition and develop deliverable land management options. As part of this work he made contact with the other landowners and other interested parties such as the Environment Agency, Kent County Council, Kent Wildlife Trust and The Land Trust and Buglife. A number of these expressed the wish to work with the Council or thought that evidence of the Council taking positive action would motivate them to do the same. Martin Hall recently completed his work.
- 3.5. The initial works recommended from the study are the formation of a number of pathways of varying widths, the construction of a number of raised viewing mounds, the formation of glade areas for informal activities, the removal of rubbish and dumping, the provision of signage and the formation of better boundaries. These works will all show a better managed and looked after site and make it more welcoming and accessible. These works will be carried out on Council owned land only. Other works such as the restoration of the orchard and the allotments and the creation of a car park may become possible in time.
- 3.6. It is estimated that there will be a one-off cost of approximately £50,000 in the first year followed by costs of £20,000 per annum for on-going maintenance. The Identified Initiative Reserve will be used to fund the initial works and maintenance costs for an initial period of three years. It should be possible to reduce the on-going costs by the use of volunteers from the North West Kent Countryside Partnership or the Bridge or a tenant farmer.
- 3.7. Members will be aware of the issue with the Eagles Road cliff. If the cliff is cut back it will be necessary to arrange the disposal of a large quantity of chalk. This chalk could be used to form an elevated landscape feature (effectively a shallow hill) on the dry part of the marshes primarily for use as a viewing platform, which would also have the effect of diversifying the habitats found on site. The Environment Agency has provisionally given its approval to this. Using the chalk in this way could save the Council approximately £50,000 in waste disposal costs.
- 3.8. Under the England Biodiversity Strategy, the Environment Agency is tasked with the enhancement of fresh water grazing marsh. The Agency has expressed an interest in working with the Council and investing £180,000 in the area over four years.
- 3.9. The Dartford Marshes area is part of a larger area included within the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme. The Kent Downs AONB has very recently been awarded a grant of £2.23m for the

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enhancement of the larger area and the Marshes will benefit from some of this.

- 3.10. Discussions are being held regarding the construction of a bridge across the River Darent to enable the continuation of the cycle route along the south of the Thames which forms the north of the Marshes.

4. Relationship to the Corporate Plan

The enhancement of the Dartford Marshes would contribute to the Council's wider strategic aims of providing for a rich and varied quality of life, creating a safer borough and promoting an environment which is attractive.

5. Financial, legal, staffing and other administrative implications and risk assessments

Financial Implications	As stated in paragraph 3.6
Legal Implications	None
Staffing Implications	None
Administrative Implications	None
Risk Assessment	No uncertainties and/or constraints

6. Details of Exempt Information Category

Not applicable.

7. Appendices

None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

<u>Documents consulted</u>	<u>Date / File Ref</u>	<u>Report Author</u>	<u>Section and Directorate</u>	<u>Exempt Information Category</u>
		Dave Thomas (01322) 34273	Waste and Parks	N/A