
| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Subject: | MEMORIAL BENCHES SCHEME |
| Meeting and Date: | Cabinet – 3 February 2025 |
| Report of: | Emma-Jane Allen, Head of Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside |
| Portfolio Holder: | Councillor Charlotte Zosseder, Portfolio Holder for Community and Corporate Property |
| Decision Type: | Executive Key Decision |
| Classification: | Unrestricted |

Purpose of the report: To seek approval for a pilot memorial bench project, enabling residents to sponsor memorial benches.

Recommendation: To approve the proposed memorial bench arrangements at Kearsney Parks and authorise the Director of Housing, Finance and Assets, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Community and Corporate Property, to extend the scheme across Council-owned open spaces.

1. Summary

The Council frequently receives requests from residents to sponsor memorial benches, many of which seek installation within the -same few areas. Historically this has resulted in numerous memorial benches of varying quality located at a small number of sites such as Walmer seafront, whereas other public open spaces are under-served. The previous memorial bench scheme was suspended in 2020 to enable a thorough review of the stock, and development of a possible new approach. This pilot project will test whether the proposals are effective in managing demand for memorial benches and raising maintenance standards, without causing an additional financial burden to the Council.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 Provision of memorial benches is a discretionary service. The Council receives numerous requests from residents to sponsor memorial benches, most of which relate to a small number of sites. Agreeing a robust approach to this issue could enable the Council to meet both the aspirations of bereaved relatives and the needs of visitors to our open spaces.
- 2.2 The previous scheme resulted in a highly skewed distribution of memorial benches of various sizes and materials, for example there are around 400 memorial benches located on Deal and Walmer seafront. In addition, sponsors were responsible for maintaining their own benches, meaning that standards varied. Furthermore, agreements to install a bench on Council-owned land were open ended, rather than time limited. These factors combined resulted in an additional financial burden to the Council and did not meet the needs of open space users. The scheme was suspended in 2020.
- 2.3 The proposal is to offer sponsorship opportunities for attractive, robust, metal benches which will be purchased, installed and maintained by the Council in return for a fee. A standard memorial plaque will be fixed to each bench. To avoid creating the impression that public open spaces are functioning as memorial gardens, the benches will not include any fixtures for holding floral tributes or other mementos. Over time, these measures will improve the appearance of Council-owned open spaces. Given the

relatively small number of benches that will be purchased per year (eight possible locations are identified at Appendices 1 and 2), it is proposed that the bench supplier is identified by seeking three quotes against the specification in this paragraph and the preferred model be selected following consultation between the Director of Housing, Finance and Assets and the Portfolio Holder for Community and Corporate Property.

- 2.4 A proposed fee of £3,500 plus VAT has been calculated to cover supply, installation, ten years of maintenance, administrative costs and removal. Ten years after installation, the Council will contact the sponsor at their last known address to offer a further five years of maintenance at the cost of £500 plus VAT. If the sponsor does not respond and pay within two calendar months, the Council may choose to remove the bench. Similarly, at the end of an additional sponsored five-year maintenance period, the Council may choose to remove the bench.
- 2.5 These fees will be reviewed annually through the Council's Fees and Charges process.
- 2.6 To ensure new memorial benches are located at sites that enhance open spaces and improve user experience, rather than all being crowded into the same few areas, the Council will publish plans showing available sites. In the first instance opportunities will be offered at Kearsney Parks; plans are attached at Appendices 1 and 2. Kearsney Parks benefit from the presence of the Parks Development Officer; therefore, it has been possible to engage informally with users, carry out a review of existing bench provision and identify suitable locations for new benches. Sites will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.
- 2.7 Should this pilot project prove successful, similar plans will be prepared for strategic open spaces across the district, as officer capacity allows. Following consultation between the Director of Housing, Assets and Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Community and Corporate Property, these additional plans will be published on the Council's website.
- 2.8 Existing memorial benches will continue to be covered by conditions that were in place at the time they were installed, meaning that maintenance of these legacy benches is the responsibility of the purchaser. Should a legacy memorial bench become damaged the Council will attempt to contact the owner at their last known address. If a bench becomes unsafe through vandalism or decay, the Council will remove it, and the Council is not obliged to fund replacement.

3. Identification of Options

- 3.1 Option 1 - Approve the proposed pilot scheme for memorial benches at Kearsney Park and potential extension to other Council owned sites.
- 3.2 Option 2 - Reinstate the previous memorial benches scheme
- 3.3 Option 3 - Cease offering a memorial bench service.

4. Evaluation of Options

- 4.1 Option 1 - This is the preferred option because it will allow the Council to test a new approach for memorial benches, which is designed to balance the aspirations of bereaved relatives with meeting the needs of open space users, without incurring additional cost to the Council.
- 4.2 Option 2 - This is not recommended because the previous scheme resulted in an uneven distribution of benches of varying design and maintenance standards, which incurred additional costs to the Council.
- 4.3 Option 3 - This is not recommended. Although provision of memorial benches is discretionary, the Council receives numerous requests to sponsor benches, which could not be met if the service were to cease permanently. In addition, there are public

open spaces that would benefit from additional benches, for which no budget is currently identified.

5. **Resource Implications**

- 5.1 The cost of installation and maintenance of memorial benches should be fully covered by the proposed fee, at least for the agreed period. The Council may choose to retain benches for longer than the agreed period at its own expense, but this would be subject to the availability of revenue budget at the time. If no budget is available for continued maintenance, the benches may be removed, and that expense is covered by the proposed fee.

6. **Climate Change and Environmental Implications**

- 6.1 It is proposed that benches will be of steel construction, which is a recyclable material. This scheme will support use of public open space by residents which provides numerous health and social benefits.

7. **Corporate Implications**

- 7.1 Comment from the Director of Finance (linked to the MTFP): Accountancy has been consulted and has no further comments to add. (HM)
- 7.2 Comment from the Solicitor to the Council: The Solicitor to the Council has been consulted in the preparation of this report and has no further comments to make.
- 7.3 Comment from the Equalities Officer: This report seeking approval for the proposed pilot scheme for memorial benches at Kearsney Park and potential extension to other Council owned sites, does not specifically highlight any equality implications. In discharging their duties members are required to comply with the public sector equality duty as set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/149>
- 7.4 Other Officers (as appropriate):

8. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Plan of possible locations for new memorial benches at Kearsney Abbey

Appendix 2 – Plan of possible locations for new memorial benches at Bushy Ruff

9. **Background Papers**

Requests from residents to reintroduce a memorial bench scheme.

Contact Officer: Emma-Jane Allen, Head of Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside.