


<p align="center">Grants Determination (Cabinet) Sub-Committee</p> <p align="center">18 September 2024</p>	
<p>Report of: Simon Baxter, Corporate Director of Communities</p>	<p>Classification: Unrestricted</p>
<p align="center">Renewal of Service Level Agreement of Mudchute Park and Farm</p>	

Executive Summary

Mudchute Park and Farm is a unique, important, and much-loved open space managed by a charitable community-based organisation (Mudchute Association). The site forms part of the borough's physical heritage and is a much-valued community asset. Although the land is owned by the Council, the management has been in the hands of the community since 1974.

Tower Hamlets Council has provided the Mudchute Association (registered charity: number 284907) with funding from the Parks Department's revenue budget in the form of a service level agreement to support the management and maintenance of this important open space site for many years. The purpose of this report is to seek approval for a 1-year service level agreement to come from the Parks Department's revenue budget for this organisation.

Recommendations:

The Grants Determination Sub-Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the Service Level Agreement to the Mudchute Association for Mudchute Park and Farm (£31,000 from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025).

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 Mudchute Park and Farm is a unique, important and much-loved open space managed by the Mudchute Association, a charitable community-based organisation.
- 1.2 For many years, Tower Hamlets Council has provided the Mudchute Association with funding from the Parks Department's revenue budget in the form of a service level agreement to support the land management and maintenance of this important open space.
- 1.3 The Council's Legal Department advised that the service level agreement should be treated as a grant.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 **Cease providing support for the maintenance and management of the site.** This would have a very negative impact on the Mudchute Association and the valuable services they provide. Although, as is pointed out in section 3, the Council's contribution to the organisation's income does not represent a high percentage of their turnover, the support of the local authority is essential for unlocking other funding sources, and cessation of this support could potentially have a negative knock-on effect resulting in the reduction (or loss) of other funding. These projects are extremely valued by local residents, and well embedded in the community, and cessation (or, indeed reduction) of this support is likely to elicit considerable protest from local residents.
- 2.2 Through the SLA, Mudchute Association provides a range of in kind and match funding towards the management and maintenance of the open space.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

- 3.1 Mudchute Park and Farm is a free to access, much loved and highly valued open space site on the Isle of Dogs. The Mudchute Association plays a unique role within the open space portfolio of the borough. The site is owned by the local authority and has been managed by the local charitable organisation since the land was secured through community lobbying as a public park in 1974.
- 3.2 To provide support to the organisation for the maintenance, upkeep and ongoing community access, the Council has had a service level agreement with the Mudchute Association for over 20 years. Not only does this charitable community group provide excellent value for money in the management of this unusual site, but they increase the sense of community ownership and engagement with parks and open spaces.
- 3.3 Mudchute Association do not currently receive any other grants from the Council. For the Council's Summer of Fun programme, they have been commissioned (along with the other borough city farms) to deliver free sessions for children, young people and families every Monday and Tuesday between 29 July and 20 August. The Parks Service has commissioned these sessions in line with the Council's procurement processes for a value of £1,500. The Mudchute Association's mobile farm is also booked on an ad hoc basis by Council departments including the Family Hubs.
- 3.4 The Mudchute Community Nursery receives funding through the Expanded Funding Entitlement (administered by the council's Children's Services but funded by central government). This scheme provides free nursery hours to eligible parents/carers. The funded entitlements are processed and distributed in accordance with the Statutory operational guidance for LA's and Tower

Hamlets financial regulations. In addition, the nursery at Mudchute has received two SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF) payments to support access and inclusion of children with emerging SEND. Any Early Education and Childcare provider offering the expanded funding entitlements with children who meet the needs criteria apply online to the SEN Inclusion Fund each term.

- 3.5 The Mudchute Park and Farm is one of the largest city farms in Europe, and in addition to offering a wide range of attractions for the local community, and is an area rich in wildlife and associated educational opportunities, it provides a uniquely untamed public open space in the heart of London's most developed area.
- 3.6 The Mudchute Park and Farm was established by the local community on the Isle of Dogs. Originally a piece of derelict land resulting from the spoil of construction from dredging Millwall Dock in the 19th century, this hidden natural wilderness of flora and fauna remained untouched for decades. In 1974 the site was earmarked by the Greater London Council for the construction of a high-rise estate. The resulting public campaign against these plans reflected the affection that local people and those working on the Island felt for the Mudchute. Their success secured it as the "People's Park" for the area. Originally designated as land belonging to the Port of London Authority, the site passed into the ownership of Tower Hamlets Council.
- 3.7 In 1977 the Mudchute Association was formed to preserve and develop the area. It is a registered charity, governed by a Board of fifteen trustees who are all local people and represent the full range of interests of the local community and are elected at the annual general meeting. A lease was issued by Tower Hamlets to the Mudchute Association for the management of the land. In about 2000, a service level agreement was negotiated for the maintenance of the open space as a public asset.
- 3.8 The Mudchute currently runs an Equestrian Centre, an extensive educational programme, one of the largest inner City Farms in Europe, courses in a range of things from dog training to biodiversity and they work closely with Tower Habitats, the Biodiversity Partnership for the Borough of Tower Hamlets as well as wildlife charities such as Froglife to promote and conserve the site's wildlife.
- 3.9 Since the establishment of the Mudchute Association, the charity has steadily built a reputation for providing a variety of educational and leisure activities at the 32 acre site and currently employs almost 60 staff across various services.
- 3.10 Each year Mudchute Park and Farm attracts over 500,000 visitors. Seasonal events and holiday activities attract approximately 500 participants per day and included: eight days of Easter activities; twenty-five days of summer activities; five days of autumn half term activities; and 2 days of festive activities.

- 3.11 In addition, in 2023/24 the Mudchute Association provided free educational activity to 7,500 children (including 900 SEND pupils from George Green School and 700 SEND pupils from Phoenix School).
- 3.12 The Association worked with nearly 1,400 corporate volunteers in 2023/24 to support improvements to the park and farm including supporting biodiversity programmes involving 700 individual and 1,200 corporate volunteers, run over 30 activity sessions and have over 15,000 visitors during the school holiday periods.
- 3.13 There is an annual management plan for the site, which is monitored by the Council's Parks service through quarterly site inspections. This is to ensure that the charity is managing and maintaining the open space to a good standard. The following aspects are monitored at the inspection meetings: litter management; management of trees, shrubs and hedges; pathway maintenance; promotion of biodiversity; lighting; signage and maintenance of benches etc. The site continues to hold Green Flag status, an external award, through which a high level of good land management and community engagement must be demonstrated.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The service level agreement makes several references to equalities. Organisations are required to have Equal Opportunities policies, and special requirements are contained within the SLA to ensure the organisations actively promote participation and comply with the Equality Act 2010. Through the SLA, Mudchute Association is required to have, maintain and operate an Equal Opportunities Policy.
- 4.2 This service level agreement actively promotes the involvement of local residents in managing open space. It creates opportunities for people from different communities to work together around a shared enthusiasm for open space, wildlife, animals, ecology and so on. Research has demonstrated that communities with a greater 'stake' in their areas are more likely to feel a sense of engagement and participation. Enabling local community groups, run by local people, to manage open space is an important tool to helping individual and group empowerment.
- 4.3 Tower Hamlets is a borough with high levels of deprivation and high population density. Although the wards in which these two open spaces are located are not the most deprived in the borough, the borough is a patchwork of areas of high and low deprivation, so access to green space is relevant across the whole of the local authority. Moreover, the population of Tower Hamlets is set to grow exponentially, particularly on the Isle of Dogs, where the Mudchute is located. In this context open space is essential. Not only does it offer a green 'lung' for the area and help mitigate pollution, but it offers residents an opportunity to come together in an era when children can no

longer play in the street and the absence of a traditional town centre deprives communities of shared space.

- 4.4 The Mudchute Park and Farm's charitable objectives include the following with equalities implications to preserve the natural environment of the Mudchute Park:
- to promote for local people the opportunity of recreation and leisure on the Mudchute, especially the young, the elderly and those of limited economic means.
 - to advance the education of local people in countryside activities.
 - to promote animal welfare through engagement with the Farm.
 - to provide education and training for young people.
 - to promote conservation both of the natural and the built environment.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.
 - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.
- 5.2 **Best value:** the SLA provides excellent good value for money with the Mudchute Association managing 32 acres of open space for a very modest sum. The Parks and Open Spaces service would not be able to maintain this site with a comparable budget, and the Mudchute Association is able to provide match funding through volunteer hours and fundraising activities that support the wider upkeep of the site. The organisation brings extensive community benefits to the borough as outlined in paragraphs 3.8, 3.9 and 3.10. Paragraph 3.11 outlines how the SLA outcomes are monitored.
- 5.3 **Consultations:** although no formal consultations are required, through the SLA, the Mudchute Association is encouraged to work with local residents to inform the management of the space.
- 5.4 **Environmental:** through the SLA, the Mudchute Association support the upkeep of the park through litter management, hedge and shrub maintenance and report any tree related issues to the LBTH Tree Officer. The charity promotes biodiversity through the clearance of invasive plants, plant bulbs, wildflowers, maintenance and development of grassland, woodland and aquatic habitats. The Association also has maintained the site's Green Flag Status.

- 5.5 **Risk Management:** under the SLA the Mudchute Association must comply with the requirements of the Health & Safety and Work Act 1974 and of any other Acts Regulations or Orders about Health & Safety. Furthermore, the Mudchute Association has a risk management policy and procedures, monitored by a board of trustees.
- 5.6 **Crime Reduction:** the SLA supports crime reduction by ensuring the park is well maintained and used. This includes ensuring that lighting on pathways is maintained and working with the Parks Service and Community Safety to address any anti-social behaviour issues.
- 5.7 **Safeguarding:** under the SLA it is the responsibility of the Mudchute Association to take appropriate measures to protect the public when recruiting staff and volunteers. The Mudchute Association has a safeguarding policy in place. All employees must be appropriately vetted through the Disclosure Barring Service.
- 5.8 **Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment:** under the SLA, the Mudchute Association must conform to all existing and new legislation including the Data Protection Act 2018.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 6.1 The report seeks the Grants Determination Sub-Committee approval to award an annual grant of £31,000 to Mudchute Park and Farm for a period of 1 year from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025. If approved, the grant will continue to be funded through the renewal of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the charitable community-based organisation.
- 6.2 Highlighted within the report are the benefits that the SLA provides the council contributing towards the community plan priorities, whilst providing the basis for objectives to be monitored. There is sufficient provision within the Parks budget to support the grants. However, the extent to which the grant funding of the community-based organisations continues to remain a commitment will need to be considered alongside the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy as part of the budget process in future years.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 The Council has the legal power to undertake the activity and award the grant referred to in this report.
- 7.2 The Council is legally obliged to obtain Best Value in terms of the economy efficiency and effectiveness when delivering its functions. The grant will be supported by an agreement allowing the Council to monitor the performance of the grant recipient. Monitoring will also ensure that the grant funds are only used for the purposes for which they have been given.

7.3 This grant does not constitute a subsidy for the purposes of the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- NONE

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

- NONE

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