

Cadbury Barn Trust and Birmingham School of Bell Ringing – Delays to the project to develop facilities at the entrance to Manor Farm Park

A Paper for the Trusts and Charities Committee, 12 April 2023

Overview

Two voluntary organisations, the Cadbury Barn Trust (CBT) and the Birmingham School of Bell Ringing (BSOBR) have plans to create a Community Hub, a Bell Ringing Centre and Toilets at Manor Farm Park in Northfield. This would require the two parties to have a lease from the City (BCC) but BCC would have to apply to the Charity Commission to change to the original deeds governing the park. This was recognised in 2017 but BCC only made the application in late Summer 2022 and there is now likely to be further delay in obtaining a variation. Such delays may compromise the project and we look to the Committee to take the necessary actions to progress the project.

The Plan for the site at Manor Farm Park

By developing repurposing buildings that are surplus to requirements in Manor Farm Park CBT and BSOBR plan to create indoor and outdoor meeting spaces, along with a community café and toilets. A new Birmingham School of Bell Ringing would be housed in the present Lodge with teaching and meeting spaces, and in time an iconic new 'Bell Tower' at the park entrance, building on Birmingham's position as the premier centre of excellence in change ringing. The garden behind it would remain as a cultivated public space.

Overall, the proposed amenities at the entrance will facilitate a wide range of recreational, educational and cultural activities to promote good health and wellbeing, while creating a modern leisure venue with much needed toilets and refreshment facilities for users.

As an interim measure, CBT now has planning consent and funding for a welfare unit on the site but progress on this too has stalled for a year whilst we wait for Officers to decide how to manage the project.

Application to the Charity Commission for a Deed of Variation

Due to the park being held in Trust by BCC, it argues that it cannot grant a lease to third parties (for example CBT and BSOBR) without obtaining a deed of variation from the Charity Commission. Since 2012, various stakeholders, working with BCC, have drawn up plans to provide facilities for community use; in 2016 Officers recognised the need for a scheme of variation to enable them to dispose of some assets with a lease; a decision authorised by the Trusts and Charities Committee. Despite later assurances by Officers that this application would be made in 2017, 2019 and 2020, the City finally consulted on the matter on 8 February 2022. At its close, on 2 May 2022, there was overwhelming support for the project.

BCC applied to the Charity Commission in Summer 2022; apparently the Commission's informal response was to take another route to seek a variation.

BCC's failure to obtain the necessary variation from the Charity Commission is delaying the project and increases the risks of its failure.

Background

In 1952, Manor Farm Park was gifted by George Cadbury to be held in Trust (the George Cadbury for Public Park Trust) by BCC, for use as a public park with the Full Council as Trustee. The original Cadbury Barn was destroyed by arsonists in 2017 but stakeholders continued with plans to develop the site. We have funding and plans to develop the site; no BCC funding would be required. There is overwhelming support from elected representatives, park users and community organisations for the project.

Recommended Actions

There are several things the Committee can do to overcome these delays:

- Develop a plan and timetable to obtain a variation from the Charity Commission
- Start discussions with CBT and BSOBR about the terms of leases for use of the site.
- Set out a realistic timetable for completion of the project.
- Facilitate the installation of a welfare unit as an interim measure.

Discussion

The project would require no additional BCC funding, it would bring many benefits to the area. The unsightly and neglected buildings at the park's entrance would be remodelled, making a visit to the park more inviting, enjoyable and safer. The project will also create some new job opportunities. There has been some progress with the project, CBT and BSOBR have plans, funding and overwhelming support for the plans from many parties but delays by BCC now risk jeopardising the project.

John Stewart
Chair, Cadbury Barn Trust

Simon Linford
Birmingham School of Bell Ringing

31 March 2023