

# **Future Governance Models for Southampton Common – Options Appraisal**

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## **1. Executive Summary**

1.1. This paper considers how the governance of the Common could be made more effective to improve it for all the City's residents in accordance with the plan. It considers three high level models and concludes that the future of the Common, through the implementation of the plan, could be best served by the establishment of a new charitable foundation to work alongside the City Council, who would retain ownership and responsibility for the management and maintenance of the Common. The Foundation would assist the Council, raise additional funds and resources, promote the benefits of the Common and provide an authoritative and independent view to the Council of the progress in implementing the plan.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1. Work to date between the Council and Southampton Common Forum (SCF) on the new Southampton Common Plan (The Plan) indicates general agreement that the governance and management of the Common needs to change. The Council has limited resources and these are spread across over fifty parks across the city. There is no dedicated manager assigned to the Common and therefore management has become more generic, following broader service aims rather than following the more specific (but out of date) management plan. By changing the governance of how the management of the Common is delivered, the Council and SCF will be able to secure the future of this important asset in an accountable and transparent manner. There is also a clear advantage in having a locally-based organisation that is focused on improving the Common, as the City's largest and most valuable open space, and how it can serve the city, as its single purpose. This paper sets out for initial discussion, as alternatives to the current delivery method, three high level models for achieving this. It recommends that the Council and SCF should together set up a Southampton Common Charitable Foundation, very much on the lines of models in Bournemouth and Seattle, to raise funds for major improvement projects, organise volunteering and promote the Common both within the City and externally.

2.2. It should be noted that the paper has been informed by the helpful National Trust report 'Future Parks' <http://www.futureparks.org/home-page>, as well as by informal contacts with the National Trust, Newcastle City Council and the Bournemouth Parks Foundation by the SCF.

### 3. The Current Situation

- 3.1. Southampton Common is owned and managed by The Council. This is broadly done under the Hampshire Act 1983 which repealed the previous local acts under which the Common was held. In practice this comes down to responsibilities within two roles in the City Services department. Firstly, the Service Manager – Commercial and Service Development is responsible for policy and developing management/delivery plans, and the Natural Environment Team delivering site habitat management. Secondly, the Operations Manager – Central District is responsible for delivering onsite maintenance. Both these roles are responsible for a much wider remit than just Southampton Common. The Service Manager Role is responsible for a range of city wide and beyond services with a view to ensuring increased income to the Council. The Operations Manager role is responsible for delivering all Parks and Street Cleansing Service between Hill Lane and the River Itchen.
- 3.2. Historically the Council has carried out engagement and consultation on anything that may have a significant impact on Southampton Common. Public consultation was undertaken on the 20 year Management Plan, the building of the Hawthorns and more recently engagement was undertaken for the Southampton Common Plan. In addition to this there used to be residents liaison meetings, safety meetings and Hawthorns/ecology meetings. Much of this stopped, however, following reductions to Local Authority funding.<sup>1</sup>
- 3.3. There is a history of local concern about some aspects of the Council's stewardship and management of the Common. It has become apparent that with the reduction of posts directly responsible for the management of the common there is no longer the resource to enable Council officers, in particular, to liaise and coordinate with the local community in the way it used to. SCF has started to plug this gap but has no formal status other than being recognised by the Council as a constituted "Friends" group. The Council places quite a lot of weight on views and proposals put forward by Friends groups and works closely with them, across the city, to improve their local parks.

### 4. Possible Governance Models

- 4.1. The three possible models are:
- **Model A:** A new advisory and consultative body for the Common succeeding SCF.
  - **Model B:** A new charitable Common Foundation, working in parallel with and complementing the work of the Council.
  - **Model C:** A new independent trust, taking over the Council's responsibilities for the Common and possibly for all of the City's parks, commons and open spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> NB no consultation was undertaken for the most recent City Services restructure as this is an internal Council process, not subject to public consultation. SCF were informed of it happening and kept up to date with its progress.

## 4.2. Model A – A New Advisory Body

4.2.1. A successor body to SCF is created and given a formal consultative role, building on the work of SCF. The Council and SCF would set up a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to ensure the new body would have the right to be consulted on all major decisions and issues affecting the Common and its views reported to Cabinet. It could make an annual report on the state of the Common. It would need some resourcing. There would be close and continuing liaison with Council officers and others in the management of the Common in between formal meetings. This Model assumes that SCC remains not only the legal owner but also the sole funder and operator of the Common

## 4.3. Model B – A New Charitable Common Foundation

4.3.1. The Council retains ownership and continues to be responsible for the core management and maintenance of the Common but the Council and SCF together establish a new charitable trust/foundation. The Foundation's charitable goals would be the management, maintenance and ongoing improvement of Southampton Common. With charity status, the Foundation would be able to raise funds, organise or promote activities like volunteering, and secure greater community engagement. Liaison with the Council would be formalised over delivery of the charitable goals set by the foundation and these may include, day to day issues, volunteer tasks, maintenance levels. It would also provide an authoritative and independent view to the Council on the progress in implementing the plan. The Bournemouth Parks and Gardens Foundation – itself based on successful experience in Seattle and Portland, USA - offers a possible model. See <https://www.portlandpf.org> and <http://www.bournemouthparksfoundation.org.uk/>. In Bolton a separate voluntary body organises volunteering: the Green Umbrella: <https://www.boltongreenumbrella.org>.

## 4.4. Model C – A New Common Trust

4.4.1. An independent community development trust is established to take over the responsibility for funding and operating the Common (and, possibly, the City's other parks, commons and open spaces). The Council could grant a lease at a peppercorn rent with an initial grant which could include provision for an endowment. The income from the endowment could be used to bridge the gap between revenues and costs until the Trust was financially sustainable. The Trust would take over the associated assets and the staff would be transferred to the employment of the Trust. SCF would help to facilitate the process and the SCF Management Committee (or members of it) could be the shadow Board. This mirrors what is being done in Newcastle where the City Council is working with the National Trust and other partners to set up a trust to run its parks, commons and allotments. The Council has a Community Asset Transfer Policy under which Council assets can be passed to suitable groups to discharge agreed functions on behalf of the local community.

4.5. Whichever model was adopted, certain principles would need to be followed:

- There would be no change to the legal framework within which the Common is operated. For example, the existing restrictions on the holding of formal recreational events would remain.
- The Common would remain in public ownership and would continue to be open and free for public use. There would be no question of any contracting out of the overall operation and management of the Common to a commercial entity although certain functions could be contracted out (as is already the case with the catering at The Hawthorns).
- The Council would continue to be the owner (as trustee for the people of Southampton) and principal funder (in the case of Model C, at least initially), and for democratic accountability there would need to be engagement of local Ward Councillors.
- There would be full involvement of users, local community groups, business and other stakeholders such as the two universities in decision making, both initially and subsequently.
- There would need to be fall-back arrangements in case any model got into difficulties: presumably the leases would revert to the Council in the case of Model C.
- There would need to be full public consultation on any option.

## 5. Appraisal of Options

5.1. The rest of the paper discusses the pros and cons of each model. All three models could be seen as an improvement on the current situation in that they provide a more formal route to consultation, giving SCF more ownership of the decisions made regarding Southampton Common. All the models would also promote more accountability and transparency on the part of both parties.

Whichever model is chosen, it will be essential to establish:

- the existing gap between the costs and revenues associated with the Common and the activities that take place on it;
- the future gap between likely revenues and those needed to deliver the objectives of the new ten-year plan;
- any potential for income generation whilst adhering to the principles set out in the Southampton Common plan.

5.2. All three models would require a continuing close relationship between the new governance body and the City Council

### 5.3. Model A – A New Advisory Body

5.3.1. This is closest to the present position and therefore in principle easiest to implement quickly, either as a permanent arrangement or as a transitional step to B or C. Establishing it initially would not necessarily entail any commitment to move to another model. There would be greater community and user engagement than now. The main disadvantage is that the revenue and maintenance costs for the Common would, most likely, remain wholly with the Council. SCF would have the ability, as with all Friends groups, to bid for grant funding from such organisations as the land fill companies and the Heritage Lottery Fund, however, these are predominantly for capital projects and do not provide revenue/maintenance funding at a time when the resources devoted to the Common are already sub-optimal; when those resources may to shrink further and when there are many other claims on Council funds, bearing in mind the fact that maintaining the Common and other parks is not a statutory function.

### 5.4. Model B – A New Charitable Common Foundation

5.4.1. Through its charitable goals:

- the foundation would provide opportunities for greater resourcing through donations from private business and individuals, as well as greater scope and incentives for community involvement.
- It would have charitable status: experience in Bournemouth and elsewhere suggests that people and organisations are readier to donate to such a body than to a public authority.
- It would also provide an authoritative and independent view to the Council in the progress in implementing the plan.

5.4.2. Accountability would be less clear-cut than in the case of the other two models (in A, the entire responsibility for the Common continues to rest with the City Council, in C it would lie with the Trust, in B it is effectively divided between the Council and the Foundation). However this could be overcome through the production of a MoU with SCF as well as through Trusteeships.

## Model C – A New Common Trust

5.4.3. A community development trust would enable the Common to access the widest range of funding sources. Accountability would be clearest. There would be a higher level of community and user engagement and control. It might be easier to involve key external stakeholders. But it would take longer to establish and there would need to be a credible business plan showing how revenues balanced costs (including debt servicing) over an appropriate period (possibly, 10 years). There might be some loss of democratic accountability although the Council could be a member of the company operating the Trust and Councillors could be Directors or Trustees. There would be an option to expand this model to encompass the entire parks and opens spaces element of City Services. It is likely that there would be a requirement to ensure that any initial revenue grant to the Trust would be sufficient to meet the Trust's costs in operating the Common. Currently the Common is managed and maintained by Officers and teams undertaking work across the city which means that economies of scale help us to keep costs down. If the Common were to be released as a single entity it is unlikely that the revenue funding that would go with it would cover its management and maintenance costs.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

- 6.1. All three models would increase the engagement, accountability and transparency of the management of the Common. This would lead to greater amounts of energy, creativity and flair that can be brought to the management and improvement of the Common. All the models would enable greater local knowledge and networks to be explored and fed into the process of managing the Common. All would create a greater sense of community ownership, and all would create more opportunities for public engagement, volunteering and community participation.
- 6.2. In choosing between these models, or any others, two considerations would appear to be of overriding importance:
  - a) Having arrangements for governing, funding and managing the Common that will secure the major improvements in the new plan and the ambitious vision underlying it;
  - b) Retaining democratic accountability for the Common as a means of linking the achievement of the plan to the Council's main strategic objectives for the City (e.g, health and well-being, clean air, green infrastructure etc).
- 6.3. Consideration (a) above would appear to rule out Model A, whilst (b) would appear to rule out Model C.
- 6.4. It is therefore recommended that the Model B approach is adopted with Model A being put in place as an interim. This could be delivered through a joint committee or working group, chaired by the relevant Cabinet member or Service Director, to take matters forward and oversee the establishment of the new body.