

2 February 2023		ITEM: 9
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Coalhouse Fort Update		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place		
Accountable Assistant Director: Gerard McCleave, Assistant Director of Economic Growth & Partnerships		
Accountable Director: Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

Coalhouse Fort and its surrounding park is of strategic importance in terms of the council's Local Plan as a valuable community, environmental and heritage asset.

A number of national, regional and local bodies have an interest in the site and its location including the Environment Agency, Historic England, National Highways (Lower Thames Crossing) and several community groups and individuals.

The park is well used and looked after operationally by the Park Ranger and Clean and Green team within the Public Realm directorate. It is popular with families, for walking and dog walking and the council receives a number of filming requests for the location with most recent activity including The Third Day (Sky), Vogue and The 1975 photo shoots.

The fort has been closed to the public since 2020. Now is an opportune time to consider the conservation and feasibility of future uses of the fort, including management models. The next steps for this work are:

- A review and updating of the current maintenance and health and safety plans for the fort and surrounding area.
- An assessment of the strategic fit of the heritage asset and its potential within the context of the emerging Thurrock Cultural Strategy.
- Consideration of options for management of the fort, including management models lead by the local community.

A list of key tasks in support of the next steps in included in Section 4.2.

1. Recommendation(s)

That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- 1.1 Notes the current position relating to Coalhouse Fort;**
- 1.2 Notes the proposed approach / next steps for Coalhouse Fort; and**
- 1.3 Notes that further updates will be provided as key tasks are actioned / completed.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The Ministry of Defence sold the 999-year lease for Coalhouse Fort to Thurrock (Urban District) Council in 1962 but retained the freehold. The fort has been closed to the public since 2020 and has not reopened.
- 2.2 Prior to 2019 Coalhouse Fort received funding from Thurrock Council, Historic England and the Heritage Lottery Fund amongst others which initiated repairs and supported an engagement and education programme including turning one of the casemates into a classroom. This funding included a Project Officer whose fixed-term appointment ended in May 2020. The Coalhouse Fort Project (community representatives) also had a significant role during this period.
- 2.3 The council's responsibility for the fort has previously sat with the Regeneration team but in mid-2022 a review of the current position was undertaken by Strategy, Engagement & Growth to understand the wider strategic opportunity and links to the emerging cultural strategy. The responsibility for Coalhouse Fort now sits within the interim Place Directorate.

3. Current Position

- 3.1 The fort has been closed for over two-years with restricted access mostly to allow the removal of items belonging to groups and individuals that used to use it under previous arrangements that have since expired. There is a need for a refreshed condition survey and to assess any immediate health and safety risks.
- 3.2 Recently a number of new opportunities and issues have emerged that could impact on the future of the fort. These include:
 - The Association of South Essex Local Authorities' (ASELA) is promoting the South Essex Estuary (SEE) Park to ensure every home will have easy access to high quality green space, creating new woodlands, restoring marshlands and completing a huge network of natural landscapes linked by safe greenways. The pioneer programme is focussing on enhancing the

coastal path and adjacent sites stretching from Tilbury Fort to Shoeburyness. The opening of the England Coast Path in July 2022 has already improved access with the new section of path in Essex spanning from Tilbury to Wallasea Island.

- The Lower Thames Crossing is being promoted by National Highways through the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project process. In addition to its mitigation requirements, National Highways has significant funding available for legacy opportunities. There is interest in supporting opportunities to reopen Coalhouse Fort and to support studies to expedite this.
- The Environment Agency previously confirmed that they will formally cease to exercise their permissive powers to carry out any maintenance activities on "the Embankment" at Coalhouse Point from 1st January 2023. However, the damaged section of the seawall has been repaired throughout August 2022. The repair is to bring the seawall into the condition it was prior to it becoming damaged in September 2019. This work should reduce the number of flood warning closures undertaken at Coalhouse Fort and its car park, as the risk of a breach of the wall will be reduced.
- Wider levelling up and regeneration opportunities through the Thames Freeport and other investment and growth across the borough including in Tilbury, Grays and Purfleet-on-Thames. The Local Plan is progressing with ongoing engagement and information sharing, working towards major milestones in July 2023.

3.3 Colleagues from the council involved in the Local Plan and SEE Park and the Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth met on site with Historic England and National Highways in May 2022, who have a significant ongoing interest.

3.4 Locally two community groups have come forward with proposals for consideration including potential community running of the fort. These groups are the Coalhouse Fort Historical Society and Coalhouse Fort Future. Both groups include members previously associated with the Coalhouse Fort Project and the latter includes the previous Project Officer. Officers have met with representatives from both groups as well as other interested individuals to understand their current concerns about the fort remaining closed and ideas for its future.

4. Next Steps

4.1 It is now an opportune time to consider the conservation and feasibility of future uses of the fort, including management models. The next steps for this work are:

- A review and updating of the current maintenance and health and safety plans for the fort and surrounding area.
- An assessment of the strategic fit of the heritage asset and its potential within the context of the emerging Thurrock Cultural Strategy.
- Consideration of options for management of the fort, including management models lead by the local community.

4.2 The following actions and tasks cover the immediate short-term and medium to longer-terms potential for Coalhouse Fort. It is anticipated that a number of these could be combined and/or run in parallel over the next 3-4 months (subject to cost, funding and IRP priorities) to ensure clarity of the overall position by Spring/Summer 2023.

Action	Task
1	Identify key partners and form a new steering group to scope the work set out below and monitor progress (February/March 2022): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thurrock Council (chair) • Thurrock Council key services e.g. Local Plan, Heritage/Growth • SEE Park (ASELA) representative • Historic England • National Highways (LTC)
2	Refreshed Condition Survey/Assessment of the Fort and surrounding area: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify any immediate health and safety concerns including compliance with council H&S/asset requirements • work towards move to Corporate Landlord from service responsibility • identify a list of priority repairs and maintenance • 5-year targeted plan for priority repairs including funding
3	Review and update the existing Conservation Management Plan 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specifically look at the actions and tasks • review and report on progress against the actions
4	Feasibility and options for future use (including management models) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of best practice examples • Appraise proposals from local community groups • Identify a preferred option (including governance arrangements)

5. Reasons for Recommendation

5.1 There continues to be wide interest in the park and in the future of Coalhouse Fort. The purpose of this paper is to update Members on the current position

regarding the fort, advise on the next steps and key tasks and to ensure Members are fully informed on progress and delivery.

6. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 6.1 During the review of the current position Officers met with Historic England and National Highways in May 2022 and have engaged with the two local community groups who have come forward with proposals. Officers will continue to engage with interested parties in progressing the next step actions set out in Section 4 above.

7. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 7.1 The vision for Thurrock is: **An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.**
- 7.2 Coalhouse Fort is an important heritage asset. Under the corporate priority banner People, Place, Prosperity, the council is creating a place where people want to live and are proud of, and where businesses want to stay and thrive, and where investors and talent want to locate. Specifically, under Place – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future – where public spaces connect people and places and clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Laura Last**
Senior Management Accountant

As a result of the Council's Section 114 notice new restrictions on spend are in place and priorities focused on the delivery of the Improvement and Recovery Plan. Any new work commissioned for Coalhouse Fort will need to be approved through the new financial management processes in place. Wherever possible existing studies and data will be used to inform decision making and external funding will be sought.

8.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Helen Graydon**
Property Lawyer

There are no legal implications arising from this update report on Coalhouse Fort. The Council does have responsibility for health and safety at the site and will need to ensure that relevant legislation is adhered to should any new studies / visits or commissions take place at Coalhouse Fort.

8.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**
Team Manager – Community Development and Equalities

Coalhouse Fort is a valued heritage asset and the community would welcome better access to and use of the site. An Equalities Impact Assessment should be completed before decisions on the future uses, including management models, of the fort are taken.

8.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

None

9. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

10. **Appendices to the report**

None

Report Author

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