

<b>Regeneration &amp; Property Committee</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	12 March 2024
<b>Report Title</b>	Swale Memorial Bench Scheme
<b>EMT Lead</b>	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
<b>Head of Service</b>	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Jay Jenkins, Leisure & Technical Services Manager
<b>Classification</b>	<b>Open</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	1. Members are asked to note the contents of this report and recommend that the Swale Memorial Bench Scheme is not re-introduced along Minster Leas Promenade.

## **1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 Following a question raised at Full Council, a request has been made for a report to be submitted to this Committee on the Swale Memorial Bench Scheme, in particular for the Minster Leas Promenade area on the Isle of Sheppey.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The Council runs a Memorial Bench Scheme across the Borough where members of the public can pay for the supply and installation of a bench to commemorate a loved one. There are various areas covered by the Scheme, including Open Spaces, Country Parks and Beach locations.
- 2.2 Previously, benches could also be purchased for installation in cemeteries, but these locations were withdrawn from the Scheme due to the large number of benches in particular areas, and the fact that the benches were taking up burial space.
- 2.3 Similarly, the Scheme used to include benches along Minster Leas Promenade, but following consultation in 2014 and a consensus that supported the number of benches being capped, this area was finally removed from the Scheme in 2017.
- 2.4 Along Minster Leas, in the fairly short length between the White House/The Broadway end to Seathorpe Avenue car park there are currently around 150 existing benches. Particularly in the area of promenade in front of the beach huts, the benches are very close together and generate different views from beach users, with some liking the idea of offering memorials in the area and others feeling that too many benches impact of the visible appearance and feel of the area.

- 2.5 The existing benches do create an on-going liability for the Council in terms of cleansing, repairing or replacing benches due to vandalism, although this is mitigated somewhat by selecting hard wearing benches suitable for a coastal location. Another impact on resources is contacting families who have applied for the benches asking them to remove items such as flowers and other memorabilia which, whilst placed with good intentions, do become weathered and damaged over time resulting in complaints from beach users of an unkempt appearance.
- 2.6 During essential resurfacing works to the promenade several years ago, a considerable resource was required to remove all of the existing benches noting their individual locations, so they could be reinstated from a safe storage site on completion of the works. Whilst the promenade is a well-used amenity area, it is important to recognise that this is a sea defence structure and as such we liaise closely with the Environment Agency on any proposed works and to ensure vehicular access for emergency and maintenance vehicles is preserved.

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 Whilst acknowledging the sensitivity of the issue, it is recommended that the current Swale Memorial Bench Scheme continues to exclude the Minster Leas Promenade area.
- 3.2 With such a large number of benches already in position along this promenade, and the availability of other coastal locations including Sheerness Promenade and some limited availability in Leysdown, it is felt that to reinforce this decision will ensure the needs of all beach users are balanced. The area along Sheerness Promenade, from Garrison Point through to opposite Barton's Point entrance, currently has a substantial amount of space for more memorial benches and remains popular with applicants.

### **4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected**

- 4.1 The option to re-open Minster Leas Promenade to further memorial bench applications is not considered to be viable due to the extensive number of benches already in position along this stretch of promenade.
- 4.2 Should the previous decision be reversed, this would lead to complaints from those applicants who have approached us since 2017 with requests to place benches along Minster Leas, and been turned down, resulting in them arranging benches for loved ones in other available areas of the Borough.
- 4.3 The installation of more benches along Minster Leas will lead to complaints from other beach users who have already expressed concern at the high number of benches located along this section of promenade.
- 4.4 Alternative memorial options (trees/plaques etc) could be explored at Minster Leas which could offer a memorial opportunity on the green space to the east side of the existing beach huts.

## 5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 As stated above, the decision to close the Memorial Bench Scheme in 2017 followed a consultation undertaken in 2014.

## 6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	Recognise and support our local heritage to give people pride in the place they live and boost the local tourism industry.
Financial, Resource and Property	Memorial bench income covers the costs of the bench, installation costs and ongoing maintenance. We offer a number of alternative locations to Minster Leas which provides opportunities to achieve memorial bench income targets.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	None identified
Crime and Disorder	None identified
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	None identified
Health and Wellbeing	With a large number of benches already in place along Minster Leas there are no health and wellbeing issues identified by not allowing further bench installations.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified
Risk Management and Health and Safety	By reversing the previous discussion to close the Memorial Bench Scheme in Minster Leas, there is the risk of a potential high number of complaints from those applicants who have previously been turned down for new benches in this location.
Equality and Diversity	None identified
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified

## 7 Appendices

None

## **8 Background Papers**

None