SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 2 July 2014 at 9.30 am.

Committee Members Present: Councillors M Dewsbury (Chairman), L Hornby, B McClenning, A Pond, S Thomson, K Tilcock, G Watt, K Weeks and J Wilby

Apologies: Councillors T Lewis and M Windridge

Substitutes: Councillor M Gray (for T Lewis)

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillors Y Bendle, K Kiddie, M Wilby

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Growth & Localism (T Horpole), the Scrutiny Officer (E Goddard), the Communities Officer – Sport and Wellbeing (M Heazle), and the Communities and Active Life Manager (I Lambert)

Also in attendance: Mr M Shaw (Chairman) Whitlingham Charitable Trust
Mr R Bennett (Trustee) Whitlingham Charitable Trust

(the press and three members of the public were in attendance)

1116 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following members declared “other” interests in the matters listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Councillor</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Declaration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S Thomson</td>
<td>1118</td>
<td>SNC representative on the Whitlingham Charitable Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M Gray</td>
<td>1118</td>
<td>Member of the Broads Authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1117 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings of the Scrutiny Committee held 21 May 2014, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
Cllr M Wilby introduced the item and welcomed two of the Whitlingham Charitable Trust (WCT) members to the meeting. He advised the Committee that the Country Park was a valuable and popular asset in the District and that he was pleased with the contents of the report and welcomed the opportunity to discuss the Council’s continued support for the work of the Trust.

The Communities and Active Life Manager advised members that the reason for the report was to ensure that during the renegotiation of the funding agreement with the WCT, there would be synergy with the Council’s corporate priorities, and that members would have the opportunity to consider and recommend measures/performance indicators for agreed outcomes.

The Committee was introduced to Mr Martin Shaw, Chairman of the Whitlingham Charitable Trust and Mr Rob Bennett, a trustee.

Mr Shaw gave an overview of the way in which the Trust worked and the management arrangements for the park, confirming that there were eight trustees in total, who met bi-monthly. The original vision for the park had been to provide quiet enjoyment for visitors. This presented the Trust with a challenge at times but the layout of the park had been carefully considered, ensuring that areas of intensive activity were close to the entrance of the park while the areas further away from the entrance were quieter and more peaceful.

Mr Shaw confirmed that the Broads Authority leased and managed the Flint Barn (visitor centre), and were also responsible under a service level agreement for the management of the land within the park, whilst Norfolk County Council managed the areas of water and operated the Outdoor Education Centre. Members were advised that the success of the park depended on the continued partnership working. Mr Shaw advised members that recent achievements included the upgrading of the roadway at Whitlingham Lane, improved footpaths throughout the park and a steady increase in visitor numbers. Numbers were calculated by a counter at the visitor centre which only gave numbers of those entering the Flint Barn, and not those who just visited the parkland/waters. It was considered however that this still gave a good indication of visitor numbers.

The Committee was informed that a public consultation exercise had recently been carried out at the park and feedback was mostly positive with the only major negative being a need for more public toilets. The Trust had responded to this by the provision of new toilets which were due to be ready for use within weeks.

Mr Bennett spoke of the financial challenges faced by the Trust in light of the increasing pressure on spending every year, whilst grant funding had reduced, and in some cases discontinued completely. He confirmed that the grant received from the Council last year had been vital to the Trust, and that they had managed to finish the year with a small surplus.

One of the major sources of income was from the Trust’s investment fund, which was a significant amount received by the Trust under the original endowment. Due to the ailing economy this income had reduced in recent years but trustees wanted to develop this income in future years. It was not envisaged that any of the capital invested would be spent in the foreseeable future.
Members discussed the WCT’s accounts and suggested looking for additional sources of funding such as the seeking of donations/legacies from visitors as well as looking into the possibility of holding concerts and ‘picnic in the park’ type events. Cllr Weeks suggested that the Trust should consider embarking on an advertising campaign to increase visitor numbers. Members were advised that the Trust was always looking for new ways to attract visitors and was working on improving the website, and returning to three year forecasts for commercial/business planning. The Committee discussed the merits of achieving Green Flag Award status. Members were confident that the park was already meeting the standards that would enable it to achieve this award and were generally of the view that it was not necessary for the Trust to reapply for this.

Members were advised that the car parking arrangement provided the Trust with its main vital source of income, helping with the funding of both maintenance and management of the park. There had been some recent difficulties in this regard through vandalism and theft at the park, and on one occasion the sum of £2000 was stolen from machines over a weekend. In the past income had also suffered when pay machines had been out of order.

Mr Bennett confirmed that car parking charges had remained the same since 2009. The Trust considered the charges payable each year, balancing the need for income from car parking charges against the desire to encourage access to the park. The Trustees were currently considering the possibility of increasing the chargeable parking times to 24hours in order to capture fees from those parking before 8am and/or leaving after 8pm.

Cllr S Thomson advised members that visitors to the park had the option to purchase an annual parking pass for £30 which represented good value for frequent visitors, and that many people visited the park regularly to walk dogs. She advised that the park hosted large sports meetings/events from time to time which brought large numbers of participants and observers to the park. It was therefore essential to maintain the facilities in good order.

Cllr T Lewis (District member for Stoke Holy Cross ward which included most of the park) sent his apologies to the meeting but asked for his comments to be read to the Committee by Cllr Gray. He welcomed the report, and suggested that the Council should continue to support funding to the park, and should not await a third-party endorsement such as a Green Flag award. He considered that a commitment to ongoing funding by the Council would assist with the obtaining of other forms of recognition such as a Green Flag award.

Members discussed the issue of car parking at some length, focussing in detail on the Trust’s contract with ParkingEye. Mr Bennett confirmed that the contract had three further years to run, the arrangement being that the Trust received as income all monies raised from the sale of annual parking permits as well as the cash paid into machines. ParkingEye were entitled to retain any monies received from the penalty notices issued when a vehicle left the car park after the period paid for. ParkingEye provided and maintained all equipment and organised/managed cash collections. They were not responsible for any maintenance of the car park itself. The Trust paid approximately £10,000 per year to the Broads Authority in respect of the upkeep of the car park.

Members were advised that approximately £100,000 income per year was received by the Trust from the car parking arrangement, whilst ParkingEye received an income of approximately £90,000 per year from the penalty notices.
Cllr L Hornby was concerned that the vehicle plate registration system used by ParkingEye was very unpopular with the general public. He was also concerned that visitors to the park were being penalised significant amounts of money for being only a minute or two late back to their car, with the Council receiving a number of complaints and negative reports in the local press. Cllr Hornby suggested it would be preferable to employ an attendant to collect parking monies as visitors drove into the car park.

Mr Shaw confirmed that the majority of visitors to the park were generally happy, in principle, to pay for parking at the country park, but that there were two main issues. Firstly, the vehicle plate recognition system was very precise, and visitors had to pay the correct fee for the amount of time they spent at the park. If visitors stayed beyond the period up to which they had pre-paid, they were able to add additional payment retrospectively to ‘top up’ to the correct fee payable. Secondly, for those who left the car park having not paid the full amount, penalty notices were not issued if they were only one minute late. Mr Shaw advised that a certain amount of time was allowed before a penalty notice would be issued, although he was unable to confirm how many minutes ‘grace’ was given in such cases. He informed members that there had been a long history at the park of visitors avoiding paying for car parking at the park which meant that income had previously been lost. The ParkingEye system ensured a level of income that could be relied upon. Members were reassured that the penalty was waived when genuine mistakes or other mitigating situations had arisen.

Cllr K Weeks expressed concern that visitors and tourists who had received a penalty notice may have felt they had been treated badly and would not return. He felt that this damaged both the Council’s and the Whitlingham Country Park’s reputation. He restated the importance of good clear signage at the car parks.

Cllr Hornby moved, and was seconded by Cllr A Pond, that the Council should not provide any further funding to the Trust until the ParkingEye contract had either ceased or been significantly amended to the Council’s satisfaction. This motion was not supported by the Committee as the contract still had three years left to run and it did not appear that ParkingEye was in breach of the contract. Members were generally supportive of negotiations continuing between Council officers and Trustees before any further funding was agreed.

Members generally felt that it was important to improve the car parking signage which should clearly advise the public that they were able to ‘top up’ their parking fee retrospectively. The signs should also give a clear warning that penalty notices would be issued if they left the car park without having paid the full fee. Members also felt it was important that visitors understood how the parking monies were spent by the Trust and understood that the parking charges were a vital source of funding for the Trust, paying for the maintenance and management of the park.

Members were informed that a number of South Norfolk schools visited the park and that the forest school programme had proved very successful. The Trust was working on plans to improve and build on the outdoor classroom and also improve the infrastructure so that it could be better used by visiting schoolchildren.

Cllr Gray reminded the Committee of the many benefits the park brought to the residents of South Norfolk, and how supporting the park fitted in the Council’s priorities of enhancing the quality of life for its residents as well as promoting a thriving local economy. The park also served as a major hub for the Broads Authority.
Members discussed the suggestion that donations should be sought from visitors, and the importance of informing visitors how essential the monies received were, and how they would be used by the Trust.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. Endorse the contents of the report

2. Request that (before any further financial contribution is made by South Norfolk Council) the WCT and partners at the Broads Authority liaise with South Norfolk Council officers and the Council’s representative, Cllr S Thomson to:

   (i) Develop robust outcome measures and performance indicators with which the Council’s investment can be justified

   (ii) Consider

   - Improving signage regarding car park fees and how the park is funded
   - Seeking donations and legacy funding
   - Three-year financial forecasting
   - Increasing promotion of the park to increase visitor numbers
   - Installing cameras at the car parks to detect/deter crime

3. Receive a report on the outcome(s) of the above discussions at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee scheduled to take place on 1 October 2014

**1119 THE WELFARE REFORM AGENDA ONE YEAR ON - AN UPDATE**

The item was introduced by Cllr Y Bendle, portfolio holder for Housing & Public Health, who advised members that the report gave a comprehensive look at the changes implemented this year, and the opportunity to review the impact on South Norfolk residents and the preventative work done by officers. She confirmed that officers had done exceptionally well during the welfare reform transition and in spite of the large workload, collection rates and claim processing figures remained above target.

Members were generally in agreement that the work of the officers within the Revenues and Benefits Team meant that many of the more vulnerable residents within the District were well supported and that officers should be commended.

**RESOLVED:**

To endorse the report and the work taken to implement the welfare reform agenda
Members noted the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

The Chairman advised members that Cllr C Kemp had been invited to a future meeting of the Committee to give a short presentation and answer questions from members on the work of the Police and Crime Commissioner in particular with regard to the number of PCSOs employed in South Norfolk, which had been an issue of some concern to members recently.

The Chairman suggested that Cllr Kemp should provide a presentation to a member briefing session later in the year.

(The meeting concluded at 12.00 pm)

Chairman