SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee of South Norfolk District Council held at South Norfolk House, Long Stratton on 1 October 2014 at 9.30 am.

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

Apologies: Councillors A Pond, S Thomson and K Tilcock

Substitutes: Councillor R Savage for A Pond

Cabinet Members in Attendance: Councillors Y Bendle, M Wilby and G Wheatley

Officers in Attendance: The Director of Growth & Localism (T Horspole), the Acting Director of Business Development (D Lorimer), the Marketing & Engagement Manager (S Scott), and the Scrutiny Officer (E Goddard)

Also in attendance: Cllr C Foulger - Wymondham Town Team
Mr D Disney - Wymondham Town Team
Ms D Sarson - Diss Town Clerk
Mr I Carstairs - Harleston Town Team
Ms N Stainton - Harleston Town Team
Mr N Hart - Harleston Town Team

1121 MINUTES

With a minor addition, the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 2 July 2014, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Arising from Minute 1118, the Committee was advised that a meeting had not yet taken place between Cllr Thomson, the Council’s officers and representatives of Whitlingham Charitable Trust. The Scrutiny Officer reminded members that the Whitlingham Charitable Trust Funding Agreement was already on the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for discussion by the Committee on 21 November 2014, when it was hoped that further information would be available.
Members considered the report of the Director of Growth and Localism which reviewed the progress of South Norfolk Council’s Market Towns’ Initiative and outlined the proposals to develop the next phase of the Initiative.

Cllr M Wilby welcomed six Town Teams Representatives to the meeting and provided members with a brief outline of the work already undertaken by members, SNC officers and the Town Teams for each of the Market Towns covered by the initiative (Diss, Harleston, Loddon and Wymondham). He commended the Town Teams on their enthusiasm and commitment, and was pleased to advise the Committee that many successful outcomes had already been achieved during phase one of the project.

The Director of Growth and Localism further explained the work of the Market Towns’ Initiative, advising members that one of the key objectives of the project was to promote the market towns both individually and collectively to increase the number of people visiting and using them. The Committee was informed that much work had been undertaken to increase footfall by organising events for local residents and new visitors, many of whom it was hoped would return, and by ensuring the towns were clean and had good signage. Members were advised that the Marketing and Engagement Manager had assisted in many of the successes achieved by the Market Towns’ Initiative but, as she had been promoted within the Council, it had been decided that a new, full time Market Towns’ Co-ordinator be appointed to work closely with the Town Teams and to drive forward the Initiative.

In response to a member’s question regarding the future intentions of the project and whether other towns and large villages could be included at a later date, the Director of Growth and Localism agreed that there were several other parts of South Norfolk which might benefit from the Initiative, notably Costessey and Long Stratton. He advised that consideration would be given to the expansion of the project in a future phase, but stressed the importance of achieving successes first with the four Market Towns already covered by the scheme. Furthermore, the intention was that South Norfolk Council would continue to provide professional assistance and assist in the funding of the project for a two year period, but it was hoped that through experience and skills learned during the first phases, the Towns would build autonomy and begin to self-fund as the Initiative continued. The Acting Director of Business Development added that funding had been secured through the New Homes Bonus for 2015/16, and although it was hoped that future funding would be provided, this was dependent upon the outcome of the election in 2015.

The Marketing & Engagement Manager provided members with background information on how the Council had commissioned Towns Alive to conduct a benchmarking survey for Loddon, Wymondham and Harleston to give officers baseline data by which to measure the success of the Market Towns Initiative. Diss had already commissioned their survey separately. The Committee was advised that much work had been undertaken to determine the unique qualities offered by the individual towns in order for their identities to be established and so that their individual ‘brands’ could be established. Members considered how the role of the ‘high street’ had changed over the past decade, with the success of internet shopping. It was agreed that the role of the market town retailer had become more difficult and the need for diversity and innovation in driving footfall was becoming more important. The Committee was pleased to note that many successful events had taken place as part of the Market Towns’ Initiative over the past year and that many such events had been arranged on days when the footfall would have usually been low, to attract those people who would not have visited otherwise.
A discussion followed around the necessity of signage to Market Towns, members feeling that increasing footfall was paramount to the success of the project. Officers agreed that this was an important issue but added that only a relatively small number of people would decide to visit a town spontaneously, and advised that much work was being undertaken to improve ‘branding’ for market towns to improve the numbers of people who would plan a visit. Signage and advertising was also discussed particularly for Diss Railway Station, where it was felt that a promotion of the town centre would be of interest to commuters and might encourage people to visit.

Members considered ways in which tourism could be promoted, suggesting that areas for coaches to park might improve tourism and encourage tour companies to run whole or half day visits to the Towns. It was also suggested that Wymondham and Dereham could be twinned and that people could be encouraged to travel via the steam train which ran regularly between the two towns. This would promote a local attraction for visitors as well as encouraging those who did not drive to explore alternative shopping facilities.

Members discussed various ways in which footfall could be improved, commenting that many other towns, where large, non-retail offices were close by, benefitted from good footfall at lunchtimes when workers visited the town centres to buy lunch and other goods.

The Marketing and Engagement Manager advised the Committee that SNC had offered a programme of specially targeted training to retail businesses which had been delivered by the Retail Skills Academy, and many participants were starting to put skills learned during training into use. She also stressed the importance for retailers to work together in driving footfall, stating that competition between shopkeepers was no longer a main issue and that by local business people working together should be one of the main strategies to achieve success for all. Members suggested and agreed that, although the four market towns had different needs and difficulties, it would be useful for them to meet together and share ideas, views and experiences.

Following comments made by a member regarding the cleanliness of some of the areas around the market towns, the Director of Growth and Localism agreed that he would ask the Director of Housing and Environment to address the issue. He further agreed to look into reports that a bicycle stand had been removed by the Council in Wymondham.

After lengthy discussion, the Chairman invited the Town Teams Representatives to share their views and report on the progress of of the Market Towns Initiative. Representatives from Harleston, Wymondham and Diss all gave individual presentations to the Committee.

**Harleston**

Mr Carstairs, the Harleston Town Team Chairman, provided members with a visual presentation which demonstrated various community events held in the town centre. The Committee was advised that, although the layout of the Town restricted the types of events which could be held and often required the road to be closed, organised events had been well-supported and local businesses were keen to enhance the community experience within the Town. Mr Carstairs thanked the Council for officer and monetary support throughout the year, adding that he wished to discuss a few points in the report with officers away from the meeting.

Mr Hunt, the Harleston Town Team Environment Chairman, echoed the comments of Mr Carstairs, adding that the Team had identified 50-60 safety issues in the town centre which
had been discussed at a meeting between SNC, Norfolk County Council Highways Department, Norfolk Police and the Harleston Town Team.

Ms Stainton, the Harleston Town Team Events Chairman, commended the Harleston Town Team on their hard work and achievements, adding that they had a very full programme of events. The Committee was pleased to note that support from the community had grown and retailers were becoming more aware that working together benefitted the whole Town and were keen to develop the Initiative further.

Members were pleased that there had been successes in Harleston and that good progress was being made. Enquiries were made regarding the bus service to the town centre and Mr Hunt stated that although the local services were generally good, many small nearby villages were not serviced. It was suggested that a private bus company might be interested in providing services to these areas and Mr Hunt provided details of a local coach company who officers might like to contact.

**Wymondham**

Cllr Foulger, Wymondham Town Team Representative, gave a brief summary of the progress of the Market Towns’ Initiative in Wymondham, advising the Committee that the needs and problems in Wymondham were very different to those in Harleston in that although local transport was excellent, residents of the Town generally did not visit the centre, preferring instead to travel to work and shop in Norwich.

Mr Disney, Wymondham Town Team Representative, explained how local business people in the Town had formed a limited company to address local issues and were working together with SNC on the Market Towns’ Initiative. Members were pleased to hear that the experiences had generally been positive and the Town had welcomed the policies. One main issue for the town centre was the lack of footfall and interest from Wymondham’s own residents. According to a survey held over two days, it was noted that over 50% of people in the town centre were visitors. The Committee were advised that several successful events had been held in the Town including a carnival and a talent contest. Mr Disney stressed the need for SNC to provide co-ordination and clear communication as the Town Team was keen to progress the project further.

A discussion followed around the impact of the Morrisons supermarket on the edge of the Town. The importance of local community groups engaging with Morrisons was stressed, to ensure that all businesses, large and small, realised the benefits of working together.

**Diss**

Ms Sarson, Diss Town Clerk, provided the Committee with a summary of the progress of the Market Towns’ Initiative in Diss. Members were advised that, although funding of £10,000 had been secured for Diss with the help of their Member of Parliament, this remained unspent and the Town Team had not met since the start of the Market Towns’ Initiative. The Committee heard that the Town Team Representatives had felt somewhat demotivated and that work would need to be done to restore their previous enthusiasm and commitment to the project. Ms Sarson pointed out that whereas other town centres mainly consisted of local retailers, the high street in Diss mainly consisted of national chain stores so opportunities for local business people to work together were more limited.

Positive features of Diss, in comparison to the other Market Towns’ difficulties, included that the close proximity of supermarkets actually increased footfall in the Town and that the layout of the town centre would allow coaches to park in the market place on non-market days, although signage to the town centre was raised as an issue.
A discussion followed around the Heritage Triangle which would greatly benefit from funding to enhance this area and it was felt that the Town Team and local retailers could join and work together to ensure that the rest of the Town could progress along with the improvements and enhancements made to this area, as a wider project.

**Summary**

Following presentations from the Market Towns represented at the meeting, Mr Hunt advised the Committee that funding for the whole of rural Norfolk might be available from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

The Chairman thanked the Town Team Representatives for attending the meeting and sharing their views with the Committee.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to:

1. Support the recruitment of a full time Market Towns’ Co-ordinator and to ensure that once in place, their contact information be communicated to the Town Teams.

2. Review the South Norfolk Market Towns’ Initiative once the Market Towns’ Co-ordinator was in post, and invite Town Teams’ Representatives back to the Scrutiny Committee in one year to report back on the progress with the Initiative.

3. **RECOMMEND TO CABINET**
   
   a. that a ‘conference’ be arranged to take place as soon as possible so that Town Teams’ Representatives can share their experiences and discuss the points raised at this meeting. Local members to also be invited.
   
   b. that the Town Teams should meet regularly to discuss their experiences and share ideas collectively.

**1123 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA**

Members noted the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

(The meeting concluded at 12.35 pm)

Chairman