The minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 28 January 2015, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Arising from Minute Number 1129 Cllr Thomson updated members on the latest position regarding car parking at Whittingham Country Park. She confirmed that Parking Eye had now been taken over by Capita who had given the Whittingham Trustees 6 months’ notice to terminate the contract. Cllr Thomson believed the reason for this to be the amount of vandalism and damage to machines meant that the concern was not profitable enough for Capita’s continued involvement. The Trust was hopeful that another company would be found to manage the car park, as this method of charging for car parking had provided increased funding for the Trust, compared with the monies raised previously through the ‘Pay and Display’ machines.

Arising from Minute Number 1130, Cllr T Lewis asked for feedback from the Market Town Conference event which took place in February. Cllr M Wilby confirmed that the event had been well received, bringing shopkeepers and business owners from the four market towns together with experts available to give valuable advice/information about subjects such as digital marketing. He confirmed that the event had taken place on the same evening as the South Norfolk Independent Retailer Awards which had also been very successful. The Council had received praise from local shopkeepers within the District for the successes already achieved through the Market Towns Initiative, and the Council had been approached by Breckland Council and other local authorities who were keen to emulate the Council’s approach and initiative.
Cllr M Wilby introduced the report of the Director of Environment and Housing. He reminded members that at the commencement of the Market Towns Initiative an assessment of each market town was undertaken to identify each town’s needs. In all cases improvements were required to public conveniences. Facilities for disabled users were not good enough and the general standard was fairly poor, outdated and in need of improvement. It was the accepted view that good toilet facilities were essential for a thriving shopping centre/market town.

Cllr M Wilby confirmed that the Redenhall with Harleston Town Council had been in favour of the new facilities in Harleston and had voted unanimously for the 20p charge. The new facilities were opened in December 2014 and were the first in the programme to be installed. Following installation there had been a small number of ‘teething problems’. The toilets had a problem with the flushing mechanism but this had now been resolved. The facilities initially received considerable attention from a small number of vandals. The vandalism included graffiti on the walls as well as deliberate attempts to damage the mechanism of the units. The Police had taken appropriate action and members were pleased to hear that the vandalism had now ‘settled down’. Cllr M Wilby advised members that, other than these teething problems, the new conveniences had been a success with local people and visitors to the town enjoying a ‘good experience’ when using the facilities. Access for disabled people was excellent and parents with young children were able to use hygienic and spacious facilities.

Cllr J Fuller advised members that local authorities were closing down public conveniences throughout the country because of the ongoing cost of maintenance and anti-social behaviour. The Council did not want to follow this trend, preferring to improve its market towns, encouraging greater footfall, and valuing shoppers, visitors and tourists by investing in a wide programme of improvements including the provision of clean and pleasant public conveniences. Loddon would be helped further by also including showers which would attract boaters and holiday makers to the town. Members were advised that interest had been shown by a number of groups/businesses in the old public convenience building in Harleston which could possibly be converted to another use. This would further benefit the town centre and attract new interest.

Responding to a question from members of the Committee, Cllr M Wilby confirmed that there had been incidents of graffiti elsewhere in Harleston town centre (on bus shelters and at the recreation ground) before the toilets were installed, with similar imagery being sprayed on the toilets as elsewhere. He confirmed that as South Norfolk was an area of low crime, such issues tended to stand out however the number of incidents was actually quite small.

Cllr T Lewis asked how the decision to replace the toilets had been reached by the Council and whether the proposal had been before any formal committee. The Director of Environment and Housing confirmed that the issue had been budgeted for in the capital programme and reported to Cabinet in the quarterly capital outturn reports, which had been set through the usual directorate planning and budget setting process, involving members throughout.

There followed some discussion around the costs involved in the servicing of public conveniences. Cllr B McClenning expressed concern about the method of estimating the
costings and asked whether there were any detailed projected figures available. Members were advised that the cost of the purchase of the new unit had been £60,000 while the expected cost of refurbishment of the existing toilet block would have been £45,000. The Director of Environment and Housing confirmed that ongoing annual maintenance/service costs for the new toilets were expected to be in the region of £5000 which was an anticipated saving of approximately £7000 per year. There would be a reduced requirement for personnel to attend the toilets during the day for cleaning as they would be cleaned automatically with each use, and there was no need for an attendee to lock or unlock the facilities each day as they were programmed to lock and unlock at pre-set times, which could be easily altered to accommodate events in the town.

Members discussed the issue of the 20p charge for the use of the facilities, and Cllr M Wilby gave a conservative estimate of £400 per year as likely to be collected from this charge. Whilst this was a relatively small amount, this could be used toward expendables such as toilet paper and cleaning supplies. Members were advised that talks were underway with the Town Council about the possibility of taking on responsibility for the toilets in due course.

There was some discussion around the maintenance and running of the facilities, with Cllr M Wilby confirming that the block would be easy to maintain in the long term. The Director of Environment and Housing confirmed that the block was constructed of fibre reinforced moulded concrete with all aspects designed to ensure that maintenance and repair would be uncomplicated and efficient.

Cllr M Gray welcomed the report, which he had requested be brought before the Scrutiny Committee, but felt that it would have been beneficial for members to have received such in-depth details about the proposals for the new facilities at the outset of the process rather than after the event, particularly in light of the funding committed to the project. Cllr Gray advised members that he had received negative feedback from people in Harleston about the new facilities, and felt that the Council should be looking at specifically what people were unhappy with. He added that lessons must be learnt from this process particularly if the Council was considering the improvement or replacement of public conveniences in other market towns.

Cllr Fuller confirmed that he had received very positive comments from business owners and shopkeepers from Harleston about the Council’s approach to improvements in market towns. He confirmed that following the resolution of the teething problems he hoped that this approach could be rolled out to other market towns in the District.

There was some discussion about the practicalities of using the lavatories (which did not have toilet seats) and also their cleanliness, which had caused concern to some users. Cllr Gray referred to an email received from the Town Clerk confirming that the units were still not flushing properly. Cllr P Allen commented that she had not found the facilities easy to use and when examining the toilets earlier in the week had found them to be unclean. The Chairman confirmed that she had received similar feedback from Hingham Parish Council who had visited the facilities to experience them first-hand and had found that they were not properly clean.

The Director of Environment and Housing advised the Committee that poor hygiene and the misuse of public toilets by some members of the public was an ongoing problem experienced with all public conveniences. He had been advised that the flush system was now working properly but assured members that he would look into the matter again.
Cllr McClenning confirmed that he would visit the facilities himself and feed back to the Committee at a future meeting about the experience.

Cllr B Riches (local member for Harleston) confirmed that he had not received much negative feedback about the facilities and had found them to be clean and pleasant to use on a recent visit.

The Chairman asked that any future complaints regarding the toilets be recorded and monitored in order that patterns and themes could be identified, and she suggested that the matter be brought back to the Scrutiny Committee later in the year for assessment of the complaints as well as a general update on the conveniences including the amount of money collected.

RESOLVED
1. That all future complaints about the toilets be recorded and collated
2. That a report be brought to the Scrutiny Committee later in the year giving an update

1138 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, TRACKER AND THE CABINET CORE AGENDA

Cllr S Thomson suggested that the September meeting of the Scrutiny Committee which would be looking at the Market Town Initiative would be an appropriate time to re-examine the subject of the Harleston Public Conveniences.

(The meeting concluded at 11.00 am)

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Chairman