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Southwold Caravan Owners Association Meeting with Southwold Town Council and Harbour Lands Project Manager

7 February 2019 at 1.00pm
Committee Room, Southwold Town Hall

Minutes

Present:

Diane Perry-Yates DPY (SCOA Chair)
Christopher Perry-Yates (Secretary)
Andy Gallant AG (Harbour Lands Project Manager)
Will Windell WW (Southwold Town Council / Joint Committee)
Jos Bailey JB
David Ridley DR

Apologies:

Kerry Blair KB (Head of Operations, WDC)
Helen Bishop HB (Co-Vice Chair)
Lyn Matthews LM (Co-Vice Chair)
Brian Matthews BM
Mark Jones MJ
Linsey Warren LW
Chris Riding CR
Nikki Macdonald NM

Item No.	Item and discussion	Owner	Target Date
1.	<p>The Chair of SCOA opened the meeting by thanking Andy Gallant and Will Windell for taking the time to attend the meeting to seek feedback on the consultation process and to answer questions from SCOA.</p> <p>Q. Will it be written into constitution of the management committee to protect the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)?</p> <p>A. WW – Yes. STC were working with the Wildlife Preservation Society and AONB. There was also work on the conservation of marshes. The focus was not just into the harbour lands but also upstream and a management plan was being put together. This would be one of the guiding principles if the projects.</p> <p>Q. How would the caravan site be protected from overdevelopment - keeping it low key amenity site? Will there be any written assurances that the new management committee will reflect stakeholders?</p> <p>A. WW – Overdevelopment had always been agreed as not the route to go down. The reason for the Harbour Management Committee was to have representatives from STC. There was no desire for a glitzy caravan site and not looking at club houses or amusements etc.</p> <p>AG – part of guiding principles of the plans is that harbour lands are in keeping with Southwold. It was agreed that it was in the interests of everyone to keep everything low key so that Harbour businesses did not suffer. From a business perspective the USP is the quirkiness and quaintness of the harbour lands so why would it be changed to look like any other caravan site in the country – it makes sense to keep the Southwold feeling.</p>		

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	<p>WW – Colin Law (previous Leader of WDC) had always only focused on the caravan site as a money maker and a report had been commissioned to look at rebuilding the caravan site and this had been stopped by STC. STC were already working on better safeguards and protection for the area. There was no intention to change the brand or sell any of the harbour lands. Mark Bee (current Leader of WDC) had confirmed on TV that the lands would not be sold, and this had been said all along. It will stay in public hands.</p> <p>AG – There was a rumour that three different companies were visiting the site and I can say that this is absolutely not true; there was nothing that WDC, STC or the Joint Committee had permitted and there is absolutely no intention to sell the caravan site.</p> <p>Q. In the past WDC had tried to sell the site. To clarify, there is absolutely no intention to sell the site?</p> <p>A. WW – the previous administration of WDC had not helped to build trust but there was a new openness from WDC and STC have a different element of trust and confidence in the dealings with WDC. Mark Bee’s opening remarks at the open consultation meeting on 6 February 2019 had been a <i>mea culpa</i> and he admitted that WDC hadn’t got everything right before and this time they wanted to get it right to a satisfactory finish. This is demonstrated by the fact that here was a Joint Chair (WDC and STC) of the Joint Committee which was something that was not in place anywhere else in the country.</p> <p>AG – there is a real willingness for WDC and STC to come together to resolve this.</p> <p>Q. Could you give a reassurance could be given that all caravan owners had been written to about the consultation?</p> <p>A. AG – Yes. Site Management had written to all caravan owners, but it was recognised that SCOA had the majority of caravan owners on their books now and so there were only about 6 owners that were not members. WW - consultation did not finish until the end of February 2019 so there was still time to receive responses.</p> <p>The Chair of SCOA advised that she had completed the online survey but there were concerns that it could be completed more than once by the same respondents. AG acknowledged this but advised that this was not controllable.</p> <p>Q. Why was consultation within the closed season?</p> <p>A. AG – WDC and STC did their best to get everyone to know that the consultation was coming. This was why there was online provision to allow everyone an input. Even if the consultation took place in August there would still need to be an online provision as it was acknowledged that we would never catch all caravan owners. The timetable was not being driven by the closed season, but by the</p>		
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	<p>fact that WDC and STC wanted to get a resolution for everyone as soon as possible before the Council mergers. It was acknowledged that caravan owners trusted SCOA to represent their views.</p> <p>Q. The focus of information was on the management committee. The whole of the Harbour Lands was mentioned only once, and the caravan site was not mentioned at all; is the proposed committee to include representation of the whole harbour lands and will SCOA be written in to the management given that it provides a major financial input?</p> <p>A. WW – You can't do anything else; it is the whole harbour lands to be run by a Harbour Management Committee (HMC). The Joint Committee would form the HMC and it would have to have SCOA and other stakeholders as part of this for the knowledge and experience. Both councils had made it clear now that they were not selling the caravan site and had proved that the harbour had never been a Trust port; it was always described as a municipal and haven port. The original bequest from Godyll gave the Common and Marshes to Southwold, there was no mention of the harbour. A lot of the misinformation had been clarified at the open public meeting on 6 February 2019.</p> <p>AG – the original 1933 order was set out to operate a harbour. The Ports Good Governance Guide (PGGG) was set out to run a Harbour. The HMC being in place can take into account local views and accountability. This appeared to be the only harbour to have a caravan site as part of the harbour lands and the PGGG does not cater for having a caravan site so the HMC can tweak the system to reflect a need that is peculiar to Southwold.</p> <p>Q. There was originally the impression that the HMC was to run the harbour but that there would be a separate body for the caravan site; was that still the plan and what structure would it take?</p> <p>A. WW – this was when the LATCo proposal was in place but now WDC and STC had moved on from that. It will be one management group who will decide on how to manage the site with key stakeholders.</p> <p>Q. Who were the Joint Committee (JC) working with?</p> <p>A. WW – representatives of harbour businesses and users and SCOA, but not the pressure group. HMC would need to look at the harbour assets and would need to speak to businesses. The JC would continue for the moment and build the HMC providing them with an operating brief which would include identifying harbour stakeholders and involving SCOA. The original HMC would be of elected representatives of STC and WDC and major stakeholders such as SCOA.</p> <p>AG – the councils had made a conscious effort to put together a group of people to make decisions for Southwold.</p>		
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Q.	Could SCOA have assurances that an external caravan site company would not be brought in to run site or sit on board?		
A.	AG – the HMC would run all harbour lands including the site and there was no intention at all of selling.		
<p>The Chair of SCOA clarified to those present that the Haven Group did not talk for SCOA. AG and WW acknowledged this and it was confirmed that SCOA were seen as a major stakeholder in their own right. Liaison would be with SCOA on all things related to the caravan site.</p>			
Q.	We welcome the PGGG accountability – could you provide reassurance that there would be no informal unminuted meetings of HMC meetings and that everything would be transparent?		
A.	<p>WW – it would be no different to the way STC runs with its committees; people were welcome to attend, but there were still working group meetings that weren't open because there are confidential items to discuss. Minutes of a meeting have to wait for a month before the next meeting to confirm them. The HMC would be open which is why the Councils had chosen for it to be public committee.</p> <p>AG – from a harbour perspective the HMC would look to use the practice of somewhere like Weymouth. This would be the aspiration for Southwold.</p>		
Q.	In terms of transparency and accessibility to the public, would the HMC be somewhere between a council and a limited company?		
A.	<p>WW – yes it would be about the same way that a Town Council would run. Sometimes there are discussions about assets of other people or businesses that cannot be open.</p> <p>AG – accounts would be made available on a year on year basis. WDC would still have to keep the accounts in the same way but the HMC would be able to show clearly the information about where the money was going. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) would need to be discussed between the HMC and WDC so that it was clear what services WDC would provide to the harbour lands. This would form an addendum to the Memorandum of Understanding.</p>		
Q.	Serious discrepancies in the finances show that WDC have been overcharging for services and caravan site profits used to prop up other services – would there be transparency?		
A.	<p>AG – HMC would balance the charging process. Being part of the harbour lands means that the money is ring-fenced for the harbour lands. The Harbour Order is clear that if there are insufficient funds for the harbour then rate payers' funds can be used with a view to repay this over a period of time.</p>		
Q.	Could some of the money still be used for other benefits in town?		

A. WW – This was under the original LATCo model which included the charity.

AG – it will be made clear that money generated on harbour lands can only be spent on harbour lands. The HMC could look at ways to help surrounding areas but that would be for the HMC to decide.

Q. What was to stop WDC charging what they like to the HMC by ramping up rates for services?

A. AG – the services that WDC provide will be charged using a formula that is used by all local authorities – it will have to be at the going approved rate for local authorities. WDC will be monitored by the HMC. As WDC retain all the liabilities and are a local authority then there is still access to scrutiny, for example, they will held to account by local authority guidelines and the ombudsman.

Q. would the £700k WDC says is owed by harbour lands be written off?

A. AG – The accounts would be whatever they are at the time the new model is put in place.

Q. Would the environmental needs be mandated (carbon neutral)?

A. AG – That would be for HMC to decide but this would be encouraged.

Q. Would the current agreement about the age of new caravans be upheld?

A. AG – Kerry Blair had stated that nothing would happen until the future decided. As caravan owners were on a yearly contact then caravan owners would need to be given at least one year's notice of any change for people to make decisions.

Q. Can you confirm that SCOA will definitely be involved in discussions on future of site?

A. WW and AG - Yes.

There was a general discussion about SCOA terms and conditions. The Chair of SCOA advised that caravan owners had indicated to SCOA that their main concerns were if they will have a pitch, how much for and that commensurate services are provided. SCOA confirmed that they had not received any complaints from members about the consultation being in closed season or about the plans.

Those present noted that the site was losing caravan owners and WW agreed that the delays in a decision being made were destroying confidence. WW advised that there would be a decision on 16 March either way and confidence should then be provided to caravan owners.

Q. Why was WDC not represented here?

	<p>A. AG – Kerry Blair had to prepare for the Scrutiny Committee called by David Beavan on the evening of 7 February 2019. He had wanted to be at the meeting with SCOA and valued his meetings with SCOA.</p> <p>WW explained that it was clear that WDC were the owners of the site as is shown in the documents in the consultation information. As far as STC were concerned this was historical and STC rescinded any claim to the harbour lands. STC do not want ownership – it wasn't wanted 40 years ago. There is no documentation showing that STC registered any interest in the land. STC would not be able to register ownership as there was no documentation to prove ownership. AG advised that WDC acknowledged that they cannot please everyone but know it is essential for the caravan site to be sympathetically upgraded.</p> <p>Q. What was the timetable over next 6 months?</p> <p>A. WW – the cut-off date is the end of February 2019 and all results of the consultation are already being analysed. The JC will then meet on 6 March 2019 to look at all feedback and look at all options: LATCo, HMC, or doing nothing. They will recommend to simultaneous council meetings on 15 March 2019 which option should be taken. A timetable of delivery will be put together based on whichever model is chosen.</p> <p>AG explained that WDC and STC valued the feedback and are actively seeking all views from all possible stakeholders. The desire was to stop the harbour lands being looked at in a bubble and to be more holistic. There is no issue sitting down and having constructive discussions with anyone.</p>		
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