

Area Forum Meeting

Notes of a meeting of the Holt Area Forum held on 9 July 2009 at Baconsthorpe Village Hall.

Present:

Harry Bruford	Bodham Parish Council
Sandra Craske	Briston Parish Council
Ronald Eggleton	Briston Parish Council
Aubrey Poberefsky	Corpusty and Saxthorpe Parish Council
Yvette Gibson	Hempstead Parish Council
Bryan Payne	Holt Town Council
John Perry-Warnes	Norfolk County Council
Marion Perry-Warne	
Robin Combe	North Norfolk District Council
Philip High	North Norfolk District Council
David Ramsbotham	Plumstead Parish Council
Charles Bingham-Newland	Thornage Parish Council
Sarita Presland	Norfolk ALC
Philip Burton	North Norfolk District Council
Kirsty Read (Notes Taker)	North Norfolk District Council
Maureen Clarke	North Norfolk District Council
Julie Souter	North Norfolk District Council
Sam	North Norfolk Youth Voice
Jacob	North Norfolk Youth Voice

1. Welcome and Introductions

Philip Burton, Chief Executive, North Norfolk District Council welcomed everybody to the last Area Forum meeting during this set of meetings. The Annual Conference will take place on 11 November. Philip explained that one of the issues that had arisen at a previous meeting was a request to identify a member of staff to act as parish liaison. This had not been achievable because of staff resources, but Cllr Gloria Lisher has taken on the role for member champion for liaising with Parish and Town Councillors. She will be very pleased to meet with parish councils and explore how to move forward issues.

2. **North Norfolk Youth Voice**

Members of the North Norfolk Youth Voice, Jacob and Sam gave a presentation outlining what the purpose of their group was and what it hoped to achieve. The group was formed about a year ago and is supported by the District Council. It will be developing stronger links with district councillors and act as a voice for young people within the area.

Aubrey Poberefsky thanked the group for their presentation as he considered that it was very important for young people to be involved in decision making. The Group wanted to ensure that they had the appropriate mechanisms in place for decision making.

John Perry-Warnes stated that some Parish Councils had looked at the ways in which young people could be involved, but was interested in how this group would achieve this. The group wanted their own forum groups in different areas so that views could be representative of a particular area. It was acknowledged that it is not that easy to engage young people and that there was a perception that Parish and Town Council meetings could be intimidating. Jacob suggested that Parish Councils needed to consider how to customise their meetings to make these appealing to attract young people, especially in terms of timing and transport. Harry Bruford stated that Bodham Parish Council had the youngest parish councillor in the country but he was only able to participate for three years before attending university.

In answer to a question, Jacob explained that he was hoping to make a presentation to Holt Youth Project in the future but the main aim is to engage with decision making bodies and Youth Councils. Philip High explained that Holt Town Council has an agenda item for Holt Youth Project to come along and report what is happening. Jacob explained that the group would be useful for consultation, giving out advice to engage young people and more than anything empowering young people to make their voice heard.

The group is looking to set up a website and improve ecommunications.

3. **Local Government Reorganisation**

Philip Burton explained that the Boundary Committee was charged to look at arrangements for local government in Norfolk and any options for delivering unitary arrangements had to meet the 5 criteria that was laid down. As the process unfolded it became clear that the criteria was really only to look at a unitary authority.

The universal view is that this has been an appallingly managed process with false starts, mistakes, commitments and obligations have

been changed, broken or disbanded and a very different scenario presented. After the judicial review, led by Breckland DC, a judgement was made earlier this year which both sides accepted as victory. The Boundary Committee was judged to not have conducted itself properly by misinterpreting some of the guidance and not having a clear understanding of the finances. The Boundary Committee therefore had to relook at these matters and then put forward 2 proposals:

The two options put forward were:

- Whole of Norfolk as a unitary authority – this would give the biggest geographical authority in the country with a population at 1 million over the next 20 years
- Doughnut model – Norwich on extended boundary with a population of 270,000 and a ring outside known as Norfolk Rural Authority with some fairly large urban centres.

Both options contradict each other so there is no logicity with these two preferences being put forward. The financial arguments put forward for these options have been constructed differently.

A recommendation will be made from the Boundary Committee to the Secretary of State (SoS) on 15 July 2009. There will be a four week period in which anybody can make representations to the SoS, who is duty bound to consider views and comments. The SoS has a two week period after this to make its final decision, but Parliament goes into recess on 21 July. As this has been contentious they wanted to give everybody more time to make consultations so the period of consultation has been extended to eight weeks to the second week of September, with two weeks added onto this which means that a decision will be announced at the end of September. .

If the recommendation is for a unitary council, this can only be made by an order of Parliament which would be laid before parliament after the recess on 12 October. A new Council would start on 2011.

The latest criteria states that 3 of the 5 criteria are now the long term benefits and the other 2 are not mentioned, one of which is affordability.

Parish Councils are encouraged to submit their views to the SoS to ensure that he gets the widest base of public views, even if Parish Councils have already submitted their views. Philip Burton explained that the Council would be looking to provide further collaborative services across Norfolk if a unitary authority is not proposed to cut down on management overheads and strengthen its resilience, create efficiencies but leave in place the democratic accountability.

The Boundary Committee has been at pains throughout not to invite comparisons which has been part of the judicial review process. Consultations which make the comparison between status quo are valid in the process.

The Parish and Town Council Association will be updating its website constantly with information on what is happening. The District Council will write to all Clerks in North Norfolk to advise of the recommendations and outlining the timescale and how Parish Councils can make their views known. Philip Burton asked if Parish Councils could copy the District Council into any responses. **(Action PB)**

The Norfolk Local Government Association met two weeks ago which approved a motion with the exception of Norwich City Council and the Leader of the County Liberal Democrat Group:

- a) That the Norfolk LGA writes to the Boundary Committee to make formal representation in favour of the two tier system of local government for Norfolk;
- b) That the Norfolk LGA endorses the need for a Mori poll to provide the people of Norfolk the chance to express their views and that such Mori poll be conducted prior to the Secretary of State's decision;
- c) That the Norfolk LGA publicly supports and promotes the two tier structure of local government within the county;
- d) That the Norfolk LGA actively promotes joint working between existing authorities and that a member Group is established to oversee this work.

A MORI poll was conducted on behalf of North Norfolk District Council, South Norfolk Council, Broadland District Council, Breckland District Council and Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council which has asked a series of questions around gauging public opinion on a series of proposals. The results will be published shortly.

4. **Quality Parish Councils**

Sarita Presland, Norfolk Association of Local Councils gave a presentation outlining the work of the Norfolk Association of Local Councils and the benefits of becoming a Quality Council.

Concern was expressed that the comment that they were given a foot in door which would otherwise have been closed, appeared to be a view that Councils which are not part of the Quality Scheme are second rate and therefore their views will not be taken into account.

The clustering of Parish Councils enables them to keep their independence but they are able to get together to achieve economies of scale and share common practice.

Concern was expressed at the cost of the qualification for the Parish Clerk. Sarita Presland explained that there was a bursary which could be used to help towards the cost. Aubrey Poberefsky stated that small Parish Councils find it very difficult to fund the training and that Corpusty Parish Council had applied for a grant but could not obtain this because the date of training was not known. He appreciated the importance of Quality Parish Councils but did believe that funding should be pro rata based on the size of parish population. Philip Burton stated that the District Council had a training budget for district councillors but if the Council wanted to encourage LSP representation then the Council would need to review its arrangements in this respect.

Aubrey Poberfsky stated that Parish Councils were often left with little choice to co-opt councillors, which was very undemocratic but the cost of an election was prohibitive. Philip Burton stated that he would take this back to the District Council to discuss further.

In answer to a question, Sarita Presland explained that the Norfolk Link hold a café session for Parish Clerks to get together to talk about issues and have an opportunity to meet other Clerks in a similar position.

Philip Burton explained that the District Council had had discussions about devolving services down but one of the difficulties is because some of the services are part of a contract so the budget could not go with the devolved service as it could not be removed from the contract. He explained that the District Council was happy for Parish Councils to take on services but in the example of street signs the cost would be explained and if this was accepted, subject to health and safety requirements this could be devolved. Philip Burton added that the District Council recognises the value of quality councils and what it signifies for the parish but it also knows that there are a lot of very good parish councils and there would be no discrimination between these. He further explained that the District Council had had discussions with 7 major Parish Councils to see if they can play a role for pivot or clustering to facilitate closer working relationships.

5. Community Engagement – The Way Forward

Maureen Clarke, Active Communities Manager, North Norfolk District Council gave a presentation on community engagement and the purpose and benefits.

Concern was expressed that a community could not be made to become a community if they do not want to be. There was generally

only interest if something had gone wrong. Maureen Clarke stated that it was acceptable for people not to want to be engaged but it might be that information is enough for them eg newsletter which is still an engagement, so the Parish Council is still inclusive and accessible giving everybody the chance to be involved if they wish to be.

6. **Any Other Business**

Philip Burton explained that there had been problems with the last batch of street signs. A new format would be used where letters are totally enclosed so that they can not fall off using more durable plastic posts. The preference would be to place this on property walls wherever possible. The budget has been increased significantly and survey work is being carried out to prioritise this work.

John Perry-Warnes thanked the District Council for its help in achieving lottery funding for play equipment in his ward. Lottery funding is received in batches with very short timescales. As Local Area Partnerships are not part of the government mechanism they have been able to tap into funds that the District Council and Parish Councils can not access. The Griffon Area Partnership has now obtained another £30,000.

Aubrey Poberefsky expressed concern that the Local Plan is controversial and that Parish Councils have spent a lot of time on assessing the needs of the parish but that agents have changed views of parish council in support of the developer. Philip Burton explained that site specific proposals consultation is taking place at moment and Parish Councils have the right of representation so evidence should be submitted if they consider proposals are wrong.



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