

AREA FORUM MEETING

Notes of the Wells Area Forum meeting held on 24 June 2009
at Wells Cottage Hospital.

Present:

Gordon Brooks – Walsingham Parish Council
Philip Burton – Chief Executive, North Norfolk District Council
Sandra Bush – North Norfolk District Council (taking notes)
Maureen Clarke – North Norfolk District Council
Mike Gates – Wells Town Council
Richard Kelham – Cley Parish Council
Sarita Presland – Norfolk Association of Local Councils
Michael Presland
Julie Souter – North Norfolk District Council
Dr Marie Strong – Norfolk County Council
Mike Strong
Cllr Joyce Trett – Wells Town Council & NNDC
Jacob, Sam & Stuart – North Norfolk Youth Voice

Welcome

Philip Burton welcomed everyone to the meeting which was the second of seven taking place over the next few weeks. At the Annual Town and Parish Council Conference last November we spoke about the way forward and communications but we have not yet achieved a request to identify an officer with a liaison role for Town and Parish Councils.

NNDC's Cabinet has now shrunk but Member Champion roles have now been created to support services. Cllr Gloria Lisher from Fakenham has been identified as the Town and Parish Councillor Champion and who will be point of contact for Councillors.

Action: Details to go out with notes from tonight's meeting.

North Norfolk Youth Voice

Jacob, Sam and Stuart introduced North Norfolk Youth Voice who gave a presentation about what they do.

Membership is around 15 from market towns and villages all over North Norfolk and they regularly meet at Merchants Place in Cromer. They are currently looking at

ways of advertising the group to other young people including looking at using social websites and the Council's Outlook publication as a way of promoting the group.

Comment was made that the village of Walsingham desperately needs to do something for the youth locally. Local nuns are working with the Benjamin Foundation who is administering a fund received.

There are many avenues for villages to get help and support in doing something for the local youth and it was suggested that Mike Pepperell a youth worker would be a helpful contact. Town and parish councils can also help with how to get views and decision making heard for youth.

The District Council are working with Youth Voice in developing a Youth Inclusion Strategy which will be rolled out to the community and will be a tool in how to engage young people. It will include contributions from lots of people including professionals.

It was felt that there needs to be a conduit between town and parish councils, the District Council and the youth in the community. The group is still growing and hopes to engage more with youth in the district by doing roadshows and talking to friends etc. They have not yet talked to schools re putting on the citizenship agenda.

Local Government Review Update

Following on from November's annual meeting, Philip Burton updated the Forum as to the current position re Local Government Review (LGR). He said it is a critical issue for us in Norfolk whether change or no change. The plan has changed significantly since the original plan developed. The Boundary Committee had halted the processes and there are currently two models out to consultation:

1. Whole of Norfolk
2. Doughnut with Norwich Unitary in the middle

The Boundary Committee are asking for preferences for one or the other. The consultation period is over but they are still receiving comments for the next few weeks. Generally views received from businesses, town and parish councils, individuals and community groups with a significant majority saying they do not like either option and would prefer Norfolk to remain two-tier. Some have expressed a preference for the whole of Norfolk but there is not much support for the doughnut model. NNDC feel that the two options will not be good for local government in Norfolk and feel that community engagement may suffer.

The Boundary Committee are expected to make their recommendation to the new Secretary of State, John Denham, on 15 July. There will then be a 4 week statutory timescale for any further representations. If there is to be a decision for a unitary authority in any part of Norfolk then an Order will need to be made in parliament. Parliament will shortly be breaking for the summer recess therefore this is not likely to happen until October. Alternatively the Boundary Committee may ask the Secretary of State to choose which option to take.

Whatever happens, there will need to be changes in the way we all work together. The current areas don't match the geography of Norfolk with lots of overlaps. There will be lots of scope in bringing some services together to create efficiencies and more professional teams – also some joining up of front office services.

North Norfolk has joined together with the district councils of King's Lynn, Breckland, South Norfolk and Broadland to help resist these two options and have engaged MORI to undertake a public opinion survey. This was chosen rather than a referendum which was felt too expensive. Philip expressed his assurances that North Norfolk have spent the least amount of money on defending these options but have been continuously updating Full Council on what we are doing. NNDC contribution to this process so far is approximately £10k. The survey will be in the form of a telephone survey undertaken by trained consultants. The group of five authorities are also pursuing further legal action as we feel the Boundary Committee have not adhered to what came out of the last judicial review and feels there are some fundamental flaws. If the Secretary of State chooses a Unitary option then we will move forward with a judicial review to which we have been informed we have a good case. This would then impose an injunction on the Secretary of State until the judicial review is heard which won't be until about January 2010. This will then be close to general election time and the process may therefore fail. There was concern that the MORI poll may be biased but it was noted that MORI have a strict code of conduct. It was also felt that the Boundary Committee should also have organised a public reference to gather views.

It was noted that in a recent newspaper article following the County Council elections there is a high proportion of county councillors across Norfolk who are also district councillors and therefore this is also being looked at. There was concern about how you would empower communities by wiping out representation. Mike Gates felt that of one unitary authority then move power could be devolved down to town and parish councils. Philip commented that the District Council workload is higher than at County Council level and local people want to see their local members taking an active role in local issues and questioned how this can be achieved at a county level.

Quality Councils

Philip introduced Sarita Presland of the Norfolk Association of Local Councils who was here to give an overview of the services provided as well as talking about becoming Quality Councils. The Association is affiliated to a national association and has over 400 members representing over 95% of the Norfolk electorate and offers the following services and support:

- Training
- Advice on legal, financial and procedural matters
- Produces six newsletters a year
- Holds seminars and conferences on different topics relevant to local needs
- Holds area meetings
- Employment guidance and HR advice

- INTRAN service available to parish councils at a reasonable cost

The Association employs 2 full time and 2 part time staff and was created to help parishes take on stronger role within their parishes and towns and by gaining Quality Parish status will give them a better standing and voice. Quality status is a charter mark but achieving what is best for the local community. It encourages the devolution of services from principal authorities and partnership working and clustering.

The Norfolk Association can provide all the help and support needed to get quality status as well as providing advice to individual councillors.

Every new council has to reapply after every four years and the clerk has to be accredited at the time of application. There is now a new clerk's bursary scheme of about £100 per financial year. Mike Gates commented that this has helped Wells.

With regards to the devolving or delegating of functions, Philip commented that there are also issues around other neighbouring councils. Dialogue has been started about what functions town and parish councils would like to take on but there is also a question about whether they are affordable.

The Association may work with clustering of parishes which may also be good for overcoming tensions. Some parishes may however feel there might be some issues of status with this. There are some things that would be worth promoting i.e. community composting. Philip stated that parish and town councils will remain an important role whether Unitary happens or not and we would like to continue working with them as they are very important to community life.

Way forward

Maureen Clarke talked about her roles as Support Communities Manager. She spoke about how the team engages with local communities in a bid to breaking down barriers. A copy of her presentation is available in the packs provided.

She explained how town and parish councils can be involved in shaping the Community Engagement Strategy and is working with District Council and Local Area Partnerships in taking this agenda forward into the towns and parishes. The findings of the consultation will be presented at November's annual conference.

She asked for people to get in contact with her if they want any further information on community engagement.

Any other business

Concern was expressed about the lack of attendance at the area forum meetings. Julie explained that this year they have used a different approach in a bid to raise attendance and have actually written to all town and parish councillors and clerks

direct as well as District and County Councillors. She encouraged those in attendance to feed back to their areas. It was commented that perhaps the invitations were sent out too far in advance.

Sarita said that this is why they are encouraging all town and parish councillors to sign up to their electronic newssheet and also to look view the Association's website for up-to-date information.

Philip thanked everyone for attending.



If you need these minutes in large print, audio, Braille, alternative format or in a different language please contact Supporting Communities Team on 01263 516346 or email: dina.croft@north-norfolk.gov.uk, and we will do our best to help.