

27 OCTOBER 2016

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel held in the Council Chamber, Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Thursday, 27 October 2016

* Cllr M R Harris (Chairman)

* Cllr Mrs A M Rostand (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

* A R Alvey
W G Andrews
* M J Kendal
* Mrs A E McEvoy

Councillors:

* A D O'Sullivan
* M A Steele
* D B Tipp
* C A Wise

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

D Harrison
J D Heron (Finance and Efficiency
Portfolio Holder)

Councillors:

B Rickman (Leader of the Council)

Officers Attending:

Miss J Debnam, C Elliott and Mrs R Rutins

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr W G Andrews.

20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Harrison, Kendal and Rostand – minute 22

21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

No issues were raised in the public participation period.

22 REVIEW OF TOURISM SERVICES

Cllr Harrison disclosed a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the New Forest National Park Authority which provided financial support for the New Forest Visitor Centre in Lyndhurst.

Cllr Kendal disclosed a non-pecuniary interest as the County Council's nominated representative on the Board of the New Forest Visitor Centre.

Cllr Rostand disclosed a non-pecuniary interest as a Trustee of the Lymington Community Centre which was temporarily housing the volunteer-run Visitor Information Centre in Lymington.

The Panel considered detailed reports following a review of the delivery of two aspects of the tourism service. At this stage it was intended to establish the principle of the model for future delivery, which would allow more detailed negotiations to continue with key partner organisations over the coming months.

With the growth in the use of the Internet and electronic means of accessing information about an area and to book accommodation, the role of visitor information centres had reduced considerably over recent years. The number of visitors to the Visitor Information Centre at Lyndhurst had reduced by around 50% and no longer had a meaningful role in the booking of accommodation. Consideration should therefore be given to whether the Council should continue to provide this service.

It was emphasised that the proposal to withdraw the Visitor Information Centre did not affect the overall operation of the New Forest Visitor Centre in Lyndhurst, which was run by the 9th Centenary Trust. It was emphasised that the Trust would not be prejudiced financially by the withdrawal of the Visitor Information Centre from their building. They currently received rent and associated payments for providing this accommodation.

Consultations with the New Forest Tourism Association had established that they no longer considered that the Visitor Information Centre was essential to support the tourism industry, provided that the Forest continued to be marketed effectively as a destination for visitors.

The Panel was advised of the comments of consultees and the employees, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report to be considered by the Cabinet on 2 November.

The Panel debated the issues in detail. They expressed their regret that the New Forest National Park Authority did not intend to take a greater role in supporting the Visitor Information Centre, which might have allowed options to be considered for the retention of this service.

The Panel was satisfied that most accommodation booking was now undertaken on-line. The main residual roles for the Visitor Information Centre's staff were therefore in sales and in providing information and advice to visitors. It was noted that negotiations were continuing with the 9th Centenary Trust on what additional roles they might be prepared to take on. The sales element of the business generated opportunities to earn commission and could be attractive to the Trust.

The Panel considered it was essential to explore other options for providing helpful information and advice to visitors to the area. Interactive maps, such as those in use in the West Quay shopping centre, could now be extremely helpful. Members also considered that the National Park Authority should be asked to consider reassigning some of its mobile visitor information resource, such as was currently deployed at Brockenhurst Railway Station over the summer months, to Lyndhurst. The central car park at Lyndhurst would have a greater demand for this service than Brockenhurst.

The Panel went on to consider proposals for changes to the marketing of the New Forest as a destination for visitors to the New Forest. The proposals, together with consultee responses, including the views of employees, were set out in Appendix 2 of the report to be considered by the Cabinet.

It was noted that the New Forest Tourism Association considered that destination marketing, and the promotion of information to allow visitors to access local businesses and attractions, was essential. The website run and hosted by the Council was particularly important in this respect.

The Panel was advised that the Council's role in supporting local businesses was considered to be a key function and a report on this area of work would be considered by the Panel at its next scheduled meeting. The support for the tourism industry was being considered separately. The existence of a strong, well-established trade association for the tourism industry allowed the consideration of the establishment of a separate company, under their auspices, to take on the role of destination marketing. This would allow the expertise of the Association and its constituent businesses to drive the future of tourism marketing, drawing on their greater knowledge of the needs of their industry.

The Panel was strongly supportive of this concept and concurred with the need to provide transitional financial support, over 3 years, to allow the new arrangements to become properly established. The Panel considered however that, as there was a significant amount of public money involved, the Council should have some representation to observe board meetings of the new Company to ensure the proper governance of public funds.

The Panel was advised that the Council would retain ownership of the tourism website as there were legal complications associated with a public body divesting itself of assets that had been developed with public funds. It was proposed that, in future, the Council would amend the website as requested by the new Company, and charge a fee for its services.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be advised that:

- (a) This Panel supports the withdrawal of the Lyndhurst Visitor Information Centre at the end of the current financial year, but would ask that the New Forest National Park Authority be requested to consider reassigning some of its mobile visitor information resource to provide an information service to visitors to Lyndhurst;
- (b) The Panel supports the concept of the New Forest Tourism Association taking on an enhanced role in the marketing and promotion of the Forest as a destination for visitors, as set out in the report to be considered by the Cabinet, but asks that consideration be given to securing some observer presence at meetings of the board of the new company to safeguard the governance of public funds over the transitional period; and
- (c) The Panel consequently concur that the post of Employment and Tourism Manager should be made redundant.

23 PORTFOLIO HOLDERS' UPDATES

Cllr Rickman, Leader of the Council, advised members that discussions continued with respect to various options for the devolution of powers, and the Government's Autumn Statement was awaited for any changes to Government policy.

24 WORK PROGRAMME

The Work Programme, as set out as Agenda Item 4, was agreed without amendment.

The Chairman was pleased to report that the Budget Working Group had commenced its work and a full programme of meetings had been arranged.

RESOLVED:

That an Electoral Review Task and Finish Group be established with the following membership and Terms of Reference:

Membership:

Cllrs Binns, Clark, M Harris, McEvoy, Penson, Thorne, Tungate and J Ward.

Terms of Reference:

- (i) To consider and make recommendations on whether the Council should request the Boundary Commission for England to undertake a review of New Forest District Council with a view to reducing the numbers on the Council; and
- (ii) To take into account the effect a change in numbers would have on:
 - (1) The Council's governance and decision making arrangements; and
 - (2) Councillors' representational roles.

CHAIRMAN