



5 June 2011

The Consultation - Village Green – Interested Parties – the way forward

Reading last week's County Press raised some questions which I attempt to answer here. Also there is much misleading and inaccurate information from individuals which worries me because it risks undermining what the Trustees are trying to achieve. I want to deal with a number of these issues, but first:-

Let me just say that the Trustees would like to reassure the public regarding the Consultation Document and the proposal sent to the County Press by Camelot Partners. We have received several unsolicited outline proposals over the last couple of years – I will outline our policy on this latter in this letter - but I would like to make it absolutely clear once again that we are not yet in a position to consider any proposals. This is because we must first restructure the Trust with the Charity Commission following the withdrawal of the Isle of Wight Council. Currently, as the House was gifted for use as 'municipal offices' and the Isle of Wight Council no longer wishes to use it for this purpose the purpose of the Charity must be amended before we can find an alternative use for the house.

The Consultation

As part of the process for making changes to the Charity (its structure and its purpose) we have undertaken the consultation exercise. The Consultation responses are now in, and these will assist in identifying the way forward in dealing with the Isle of Wight Council having given up its beneficial right and incorporating the views of local people and organisations. We hope the background information and ideas we supplied with the questionnaire have helped people to understand and comment on the facts. We have received useful responses which are being analysed for best use.

Following comment in the County Press, I regret to say that the response of the Members of Cowes Town Council are rather negative and don't offer any properly reasoned alternatives to the suggestions made by the Trustees. The response of Cowes Town Council (for which they sought and were granted a 4 week extension of time for submission) only partly addresses issues within the scope of the Consultation exercise.

Before issuing this paper the Charity Commission told us that it was balanced and presented matters fairly. It gave information, set out the views of the Trustees as a body (it would have been criticised if it had not done so) and encouraged other views. It gave access to Reports via the NHCT website. It was not a 'flawed document' or one 'lacking transparency'. It invited people and organisations to express their views within a manageable and appropriate context. We circulated it widely to every organisation we could identify in the Cowes area, we advertised the fact that we were consulting and the background reports and professional advice we had received (the condition survey and the feasibility report) were on our website for people to read.

Village Green

Regarding the published support by Cowes Town Council for a proposal to apply for Village Green, the Trustees have received legal advice that it cannot be a Village Green because the Park was gifted for use by the people of Cowes in 1929 and its use by the people of Cowes has been licensed ever since as a result of that Gift.

We are advised that pursuing this course would put unnecessary strain on both the Council's and Trust's resources of manpower and funding. The Trustees oppose a village green application as they must act in the best interests of the Trust.

Also, it seems to me that CTC views are contradictory in that they support an enabling mixed development and on the other hand also support a Village Green (which is a primary means of preventing any type of development – enabling or otherwise). The Trustees think that some minor elasticity around the House is necessary although they have as their guiding principle that any elasticity should not jeopardise the parkland and must be kept to a minimum.

It has frequently been clearly stated by me that the Trustees intended to preserve and protect the real enjoyment of the parkland by local people and I hope those who have not read and digested the Consultation paper will be reassured.

Commercial proposals

Last week the County Press reported on a new commercial proposal sent to them outlining an idea for a Nursing Home to be built onto the House. It is Trust policy to accept unsolicited expressions of interest but not to comment on any detail.

To explain, over the past 18 months several commercial organisations have come forward as being interested in developing Northwood House for various purposes, all of whom have been treated evenly and with confidentiality. All were advised that the Trust was not yet in a position to progress any proposals but were invited to visit the house and offered a meeting. Some expressions of interest were then withdrawn and others are retained in our files. Last week, Camelot Partners placed their outline proposal in the public arena.

Because of the terms of the charitable trust and the need to work through significant formalities we are still not able to progress any such commercial ideas. Once we have considered the public responses to our consultation and how this fits with the Trustees' Vision, we will continue the effort to create a practical Trust document to allow us to make progress towards the sustainable future which it is our role as Trustees to identify and set in place. Then, if agreed, we would actively seek expressions of interest, based on the identified requirements of the charitable trust, monitored by the Charity Commission and working with English Heritage. All those who have previously submitted unsolicited proposals to us will then be considered as part of a formal and transparent process to invite interest and judge proposals against criteria which will ensure decisions are in the best interests of the Trust which is to secure a sustainable future for the house.

No sale is possible without the consent of the Charity Commission and please note this was not the recommendation of the Trustees in our consultation paper. Any long lease on the building could only occur after a rigorous tender process which the public will hear all about. Currently the Trustees have no such plans but we must find a sustainable future for

the House and Park. As custodians of a grade 2* listed building we are legally obliged to maintain it so we must find a means of funding both the current and future capital and revenue costs of the estate properties as well as the park.

Company Limited by Guarantee

We were advised of the necessity for a company limited by guarantee to ensure proper management of the trading aspect of the Trust for the benefit of the House and Park. We did not have the information to prepare its detailed terms of operation, (and still do not) or decide who should be directors for the long term but wished to register the company name without delay. This required one named director, which could have been an accountant or a solicitor, but Philip Thwaites was volunteered as he is our commercial advisor. No Trustee or advisor may make any personal gain from his association with the Trust. To allow registration of the company we used a standard memorandum and articles of association and followed normal practice where trading companies retain a reserve to cover liabilities such as tax. This set up is normal and transparent. Currently the company is dormant. When it is activated directors will be chosen as appropriate and publicised on our website.

So what else is happening?

As far as the House and Park are concerned, Trustees, led by Maggie Ankers and Janet Allan, are working endlessly on maintenance issues, controlling and monitoring expenditure very carefully and benefitting from a small but growing band of volunteers in the community who are a wonderful help. Our Friends have done some fundraising - the very successful Jazz evening and working with the Friends of St Mary's in providing refreshments to support Cowes Carnival Committee's Picnic in the Park on 29 May - and notably supported some of the colourful new planting in the flower beds. We seek interest in holding events in the House and Park and the recent two open days were clearly welcomed by many people who queued cheerfully for the tours of the House, talked to us and shared their views as well as making donations which may well be used towards providing a dog-free picnic area in the Park. The finals for Bestival were held at the house - successfully managed by the experienced promoters and bringing life back into the house for a different age group. We were delighted that the house was hired for this purpose and brought a younger generation in to see what a fantastically versatile building we have in Cowes for musical events of all kinds.

It is frustrating for us all that for (understandable) reasons outside our control we are behind schedule on organisation matters by three months but we are moving with sensible speed on a range of important issues as well as developing the house for events to generate income and managing the estate.

You can never say thank you too many times and once again I thank all the Volunteers who have given their time over the last months often in freezing temperature during the Winter to clean, clear, scrape and paint the fine rooms and the kitchen areas to bring the House up to an excellent standard so that once again weddings and events can take place. David Rogers at All About Catering is waiting to take your call on [01983 248500](tel:01983248500) or email info@allaboutcatering.co.uk Trustees and advisors are also all voluntary and I thank them

too. Recently we appointed an administrator, Jo Ferguson, and of course Chris Buckett is our excellent House Manager/tour guide.

We are dismayed that certain groups and individuals find it difficult to see the potential of this wonderful asset for the community. The Trustees, all unpaid volunteers, are trying to bring all the strands together to make an informed view for the future of this Island jewel. Let's all work together to make the Charity a success for the benefit of future generations.

Can you help?

If you have skills to bring to the Trust, please contact us by writing direct to us at trustees@northwoodhouse.org or phoning 01983 293642. Thank you to those who already have.

And finally

Please be assured that no decisions will be made by the Trustees as to the long term future of the House without wide publicity and consultation with interested parties. The purpose of the Consultation exercise, which has just completed, was to attempt to find consensus for a structure which could possibly take forward an enabling development of the House to bring it back to life. It was not a process to side-step local involvement as to the nature of that development – by definition, being a public consultation with all the information we made available to people, how could it be? I hope that this rather long message will reassure local people as to the Trustees intentions.

My monthly report to Cowes Town Council appears on this website, www.northwoodhouse.org, and in addition I hope you will continue to check our website to see regular updates on different issues.

Best wishes,

Ann Thwaites
Chairman