



## CHAIR OF THE TRUSTEES' REPORT TO COWES TOWN COUNCIL

3 November 2010

This Council is aware that due to the withdrawal of IWC from its previous management role in connection with the House and Park the Trustees have had to crisis manage a large number of matters. Most of these had to be addressed at a time when the Trustees had virtually no financial resources available to them. Many of these are now taking shape and the trustees are confident that they have, with assistance from a number of local citizens who have given of their time and expertise without charge, found solutions to many of the most pressing problems. Where solutions have yet to be found the trustees have commenced the task of addressing the more intractable problems.

In October I reported to CTC that we were at a detailed stage with negotiations for a professional contractor to take on the management of car parking on behalf of the Trust. At that meeting it was agreed that CTC would ask the Trust to provide costings for items they wished CTC to support. Then the CTC Northwood House Sub Committee would be convened to discuss them, and I would be able to attend to provide further details as needed. On 15 October I asked the Mayor what further information was required, as at that stage IWC had given CTC as much detail as the Trust possessed. There was no reply. However I received a letter from the Clerk stating:

"Councillor Wells has asked me to arrange a meeting room for the Northwood House working group – I have organised the Northwood House Community Hall for that meeting on Monday, 18<sup>th</sup> October at 2pm. The Working Group comprises The Town Mayor and Councillors Banks, Hammond, Matthews and Walters but as agreed at the last Town Council meeting, all other Councillors are welcome to attend."

I immediately replied that I would be away and was unable to attend. Despite the short notice that meeting went ahead and I understand some additional Councillors attended.

I have seen no minutes of the sub group meeting, but our Mayor has written to me outlining a proposal prepared at that meeting but not yet discussed by the full Council. I responded once I had returned to Cowes and had the opportunity to discuss his suggestion with the Trustees, and asked the clerk to circulate my reply to all Councillors.

I was surprised not to receive any comment about any of the individual aspects on which the Trustees had requested support but instead an outline proposal for Cowes Town Council to take over managing the car park and for the Council to use the income for the benefit of the grounds, handing any surplus (which there may not have been having regard to the terms of the proposal) to the Trust to use for the House.

Only 7 months ago Councillor Brown advised the Trustees to get control of the car park income. That was already our plan and we have been working towards it ever since.

Bearing in mind I had just reported to CTC that we were in the final detail stages of engaging a professional operator and the announcement made by the Mayor earlier this year in the County Press that the Trustees should gain control from IWC over the car parking income, I found this new suggestion difficult to reconcile with what had gone before. In my opinion the proposal offered no benefit to the Trust but simply replaced IWC with Cowes Town Council. I have to say that I am unaware of any particular

expertise possessed by CTC in car park management. No explanation was supplied as to how the management would be funded. I assume the proposal was that a management fee would be taken from the income. It seemed to me that the proposal suffers from the detriment from the perspective of the Trust that once again the Trust would be dependent on a Council deciding how to present its accounts and whether indeed any surplus would be handed over. This would result in the last beneficiary of the income stream being much needed maintenance work on the House. CTC should understand that the Trustees' regard it as a fundamental requirement to at least obtain control of the Trust's finances with a view to managing them for the maximum benefit of the Trust in accordance with the 2002 Scheme. I wrote accordingly to the Mayor that this idea was not timely and was not one the Trustees considered they could accept. Furthermore I made the point that it was a matter of regret to the Trust that CTC had not apparently given any serious consideration to any of the requests made by the Trustees for support.

I repeat, I think it is a great pity that CTC has not been seen to support the Trustees (at a particularly difficult time) in any practical way.

In September 2009 CTC was talking about raising a special precept to support Northwood House but this was not followed up, in spite of the public expressing interest in doing so. In his email to me of 31 October, the Mayor suggests I do not understand the matter of Town Council finances. He is incorrect. As a past Chairman of a local Council (current precept over £172,000) before I came to the Island I do have understanding of such matters. There are reserves built into every prudent council's accounts, and it would be quite feasible to consider using a small portion of that money for specific areas of current concern where the Trustees are not able to allocate funds. Of course I agree that larger sums require longer term planning.

The Trustees have asked for Cowes Town Council support specifically in temporarily taking over the management of the Community Hall, for the play area and for the street lighting facility on the estate which exists for the benefit of the Cowes Community.

Further ways in which CTC can assist would be with the conduct of a consultation process in the local community as to the long term future user of the House and indeed to provide its own ideas (this is not a matter for immediate action while the Trustees are awaiting the results of a feasibility study carried out by Knight Frank but we hope to commence this process quite soon).

CTC could also assist with a consultation process in the local community as to the long term future use of the Park and indeed as to the funding for improvements to the facilities offered and indeed it could provide its own ideas.

I now turn to other matters on which I am able to report:

The maintenance of the Park has been addressed and contracts are being entered into after long standing difficulties in obtaining necessary information from IWC; Grass is being cut as necessary, flower beds tidied and planned for next season, leaf sweeping and essential tree maintenance arranged. The dog and litter bins contracts are being finalised. Arrangements are continuing to enable bowling to continue in the Park.

A temporary solution for the Park Road car park was negotiated with IWC and Notice has now been given of its determination in accordance with the agreement. In October contracts were signed by the Trustees with professional provider Euro Car Parks Limited who will take over on 13.11.10. ECP was selected from a field of seven professional operators and the Trustees believe that income will be substantial and very beneficial for Trust funds. Much detailed work has been done by advisors and trustees including to ensure effective and legal signage.

The Rotunda area and access road has been cleared and cleaned, yellow and white lines are now in place for safe management of the area. Communicating with the all day, all

week, even longer parkers has been a time consuming problem to ensure that the area was safe for this work to be done. Parking in the Rotunda area will be managed professionally by ECP for short term parking only, starting 4 November with the first hour free. Consultation with Park users indicates satisfaction that cars and vans which have been left all day, all night, even all week at no charge will no longer be able to fill this car park.

The Trustees recognise that the Long Term Car Park is an important service for Cowes and to users of the Red Jet and it is our intent for this to continue much as before, with some additional car spaces and fewer dedicated coach spaces. We believe IWC permit holders have all been notified by IWC that its permits will not be valid in either car park, and the Trustees have announced new style NHCT Permits. Payment by mobile phone will be available.

Issues relating to concerns that the Trustees have about IWC's accounting have been and are being addressed and consultation with professionals and the auditors has taken place.

Issues relating to a private property connected to the Trust have been and are being addressed.

Shortly the Trustees intend to commence to address the issue of the unsatisfactory position of Medina Housing as regards boundaries and the manner in which IWC has permitted it to use Trust land.

Talks are nearing completion with a top quality catering provider for a temporary commercial presence in the house who will promote and service events at the House while the feasibility study and appropriate consultation is conducted, completed and resulting action planned by the Trustees. The marriage licence is active and substantial income can be gained once again from civil ceremonies as well as receptions and other events.

It is now necessary to deep clean the whole kitchen area. For this to happen, the caretaker's flat must first be emptied as this is the only practical access. The Trustees have asked CTC to remove the various items stored there and requested that this be attended to this week.

The temporary catering contractor over Cowes Week and August has vacated the House.

Caretaker and security for the House has been put in place.

Volunteers have assisted in cleaning the Community Hall and other parts of the House to bring these areas into use as quickly as possible. The Trustees are very grateful for this timely support

The Park Road toilets have been temporarily closed and boarded up while attempts are made to find an interest body to take over responsibility for them (the Trustees do not intend to re-open them and they will remain closed unless and until such a body is found).

Utility providers to the House and Park are being contacted and progress has been made in identifying stop cocks and other necessary safety matters, but we await information from IWC relating to changing the timings of the street lights to winter time.

IWC has offered some limited assistance with clearing the House of rubbish.

Pursuant to advice from the Charities Commission the Trustees are taking advice from a specialist Charity Solicitor on the incorporation of a company limited by guarantee to take over the trading activities of the Trust.

The Trustees believe that sufficient funds will shortly commence to accrue to the Trust to allow it to meet those commitments which it has determined to continue to meet (at least in the short term) but having regard to the pressing need for repairs to the House these will not allow the Trust to subsidise CTC or indeed any other local interest group. The Trustees do wish, however, to offer CTC temporary accommodation for meetings and temporary offices at very reasonable rates. Whether the length of such offer can be extended will depend on the decisions taken as to the long term user of the House.

The Trustees are also in discussion with the Charities Commission as to possible changes to the Scheme to allow at a suitable stage a separation of the activities in connection with the Park and those in connection with the House. It is early days so far as any new Scheme but the views of CTC will be carefully taken into account as well as those of all other interest groups before any steps to achieve this are taken.

A new advisor with high level commercial experience has been appointed.

Volunteers and the Friends of Northwood House & Park are assisting with refreshing paintwork, rewiring of chandeliers and cleaning them. Drains have been cleared for the first time in years. There is considerable interest in helping in the House and in the Park which in turn requires some organisation. I can report great spirit and everyone's interest and labour is very much appreciated at this time, but the Trustees know that in the long term suitable budgets must be prepared and tradesmen employed on a formal basis.

Plans are going ahead to put up relevant information on the signs left behind at our request by IWC.

Press releases have been prepared to inform people about what is going on and what is planned.

The Trust's official website is updated regularly with Northwood House & Park news. [www.northwoodhouse.org](http://www.northwoodhouse.org). This report will be placed on the website.

House maintenance work continues to be prioritised and costed so that action is taken as soon as funds and circumstances permit.

IWC has agreed it is their responsibility to maintain the rose bed on Park Road, as they state it is owned by them and not by the Trust.

Application has been made to Southern Cooperative to be one of their charities in the coming year. Other organisations in Cowes have been approached and many have shown a real interest and support for the Trust in a variety of ways.

The launch of the Cowes Heritage exhibition was a great success. Various members of the Ward family were present and have indicated a willingness to assist the Trustees. As a result many people have visited the house and have seen its potential.

The Trustees are prioritising and collating information on contracts and providers to identify costs to enable them to prepare a budget based on what income can be generated, mostly from the car parks and events in the House.

Northwood House and Park have the potential to develop as an asset for Cowes and for the Island and it is the Trustees' task to take the lead in working towards a sustainable future for the property. Cowes Town Council has a power of appointment to appoint a Trustee and I have been appointed by it pursuant to the power. Although I am not a representative of CTC on the Board of Trustees but have independent duties I have made it my business to report to CTC in reasonable detail every month.

Local people have demonstrated interest by giving their time and skills and they tell me that they want to see CTC show some practical support at this challenging interim time. As a Town Councillor I believe they expect me to be given the opportunity to participate

in future meetings of the Northwood House Subcommittee and to work with CTC for the greatest mutual benefit. Indeed that is what I hope I have been doing and will continue to do.

This is a long report so I have circulated it in advance to reduce the time taken at our meeting.

Ann Thwaites  
3 November 2010 \*