



NORTHWOOD HOUSE CHARITABLE TRUST

Verbal Summary Report delivered to Cowes Town Council 1.12.10

This is a summary of the previously circulated written report.

As a Town Councillor, nominated by this body as a Trustee of the Northwood House Charitable Trust of which I am Chairman, I have found the application of the Local Authorities Model Code of Conduct to be unhelpfully restrictive and have now taken advice which clarifies the situation to the extent that I believe I will be able to participate more usefully in future Council discussions about Northwood House.

- a) the view has been expressed that NHCT is a "failing" charity. This is neither fair on the Trustees who previously were victims of a "stranglehold trust" and have only for the past 8 weeks been in a position to take independent steps, nor is it in keeping with the facts which I would respectfully ask that CTC broadcast by all possible means.
- b) We are pleased to announce the appointment as Trustee of David Christie, previously retained as the Trust's pro bono Barrister. We still need an Accountant (preferably with forensic accounting skills) and a Chartered Surveyor (preferably with knowledge of and interest in the problems of a Grade 2* Listed Building as well as general property skills). If CTC can assist in identifying suitable trustee candidates we would be grateful.
- c) Since the last meeting David Christie met the Mayor to find the way forward and a meeting with the Northwood House Sub Group is planned shortly. David provided the Mayor with a budgeted list of areas where the Trustees consider this Council could supply much needed help to the Trust. I do ask that assistance be given as the finances of the Trust are severely stretched.
- d) Amongst other things discussion took place as to the desire of CTC to use one of the principal rooms in the House (the Albert) instead of the Community Hall for its meetings and in principle the Trustees have agreed to this as the main rooms are now almost ready for use.

We are all working hard to get to grips with the many and varied problems facing the House and Park – Trustees, advisors, volunteers alike. 7 days a week, all hours of the day. Sometimes on planned tasks, other times dealing with problems arising and demanding attention.

- Frankly CTC has not assisted up until now but I know CTC and the Trust share the desire to further the interests of the people of Cowes as a matter of preference, together with those of the other inhabitants of and visitors to the IoW.

As you all know, the letter of interest in taking over the operation of the Car Park sent to me by the Mayor arrived too late as NHCT had already (NOT subsequently

as reported in the current Beacon) reached an agreement with ECP. In any event CTC's idea was not, based on advice we received, in keeping with the 2002 Scheme

- We had to put in place a temporary licence, brokered by David Christie, for IWC to continue to operate the Car Park because the Trustees simply were not given enough time or assistance by IWC to hit the ground running.
- We have had to battle with IWC over many issues, Accounts, pictures – which they insisted on removing to store – and simply obtaining useful management information about numerous utility providers, meter locations, contracts. Progress on many fundamental issues improved towards the end of IWC's involvement when Chris Mathews was active and did his best to be helpful.

It is only 8 weeks since IWC finally left the building.

- Huge amounts of work have been done inside the House.
- The most urgent two dozen contracts have been reviewed/entered into.
- Volunteer teams worked together. People on Job Seekers Allowance are also assisting.
- Emergency steps taken to keep the rain out - £7500 alone on this in the Rotunda – all of which reduces what is available elsewhere.
- Plans made for serious external decoration including upgrading the look of the Rotunda.
- Rubbish cleared from the buildings room by room.
- Decorating of the public rooms has taken place. Chandeliers dismantled for repair and cleaning. Rooms nearly ready to be used again for Events
- Offices available for short term licence refurbished and are ready for occupation.
- Kitchen and food preparation areas are being deep cleaned and prepared for use.
- Plans made to improve toilet facilities.
- Enquiries for events are being managed.
- A part-time caretaker for the House, security guards and a very part time administrator are now in place.
 - Plans are in place for grounds maintenance including regular grass cutting, dealing with a dump of used needles, dog and litter bin management, suitable inspection of the play area, tree management, leaf and litter clearing.
 - The electric consumption for the lights in the Park is a significant drain on Trust income and best value is being sought.
 - We hope to reopen the toilets in the Park as usual next Spring, but, unless income dramatically improves or a sponsor is found it is unlikely that the Park Road toilets will re-open.
 - Suitable inspection programme for the play area is now in place.
 - Systems to comply with fire regulations in place.
 - Commercial information from IWC as to its contracts with grounds-people etc proved impossible but it is clear that IWC charged the Trust more than it paid the Contractors.
- Drains in the Rotunda have been cleared of decades of debris and the area swept several times. This is an untidy time of year but plans are in place to manage the leaf drop.
- In the Rotunda it is now possible for dog walkers and others to park there (1 hour free), never possible under IWC's management
- We are nearing agreement with the Bowlers to let them manage their own Green and Pavilion
- A Park tidy up is planned by volunteers for next weekend.
- Climbers and ivy causing damage to the House and obscuring the view from its windows have been removed.
- A huge amount of man hours has been donated by Trustees, advisors, all volunteers, including some skilled craftsmen.
- Discussions have been taking place to attempt to return the Park to its original purpose as an arboretum and parkland setting for rather a grand house as opposed to a municipal park. In the meantime we do not intend the Park to deteriorate to an unacceptable degree while we direct our very limited resources

at emergency works desperately needed elsewhere – sponsorship could really help here.

- All About Catering signed a 25 page contract last week after several weeks of negotiation, starting shortly as the House's exclusive Event caterers.
- We introduced a 5 day parking permit, part of the original planning but there was insufficient time to do all the detail work before ECP started
- The Car Park required a careful tender process and a commercial contract- this in itself was a large undertaking for the Trustees and advisors.
- We have noted a campaign against the Trustees centred on car park permit cost rises. As a result, the Trustees have had to put significant time and effort into rebutting misleading reporting and have vastly extended the NHCT website which I am sure you will all have visited – www.northwoodhouse.org
- A Licence and Regulations have been put in place for the user of the Community Hall.
- The Trustees have recently discovered that a Lodge in the Park belonging to NHCT has been let by IWC outside the scheme and now believe the letting was never in accordance with the Charitable Scheme and is probably a liability rather than the asset it should be.
- The Trustees have started to grapple with the issues concerning the area of land occupied by Medina Housing Association which is not in its title but forms part of the title of NHCT.
- We have had to liaise with the Charity Commission over the issue of a new Custodian Trustee and a new scheme and the setting up of a company limited by guarantee to undertake our trading (as NHCT itself cannot permanently be engaged in trading). We wish to identify a suitable local interest group to replace IWC as a nominating body and any views of CTC will be welcome.

e) NHCT is currently operating on the basis of a deficit budget (which we are keeping within strict limits). We have many and varied demands on our funds and administrative resources. Any assistance from CTC would enable us to use the funds so freed up in other desperately needed areas and would ease the problems of choice we have – one of which is to deliberately not spend too much money on the Park, while it is needed in the House.

In addition, I should draw attention to the fact that due to the Feasibility Study currently being carried out by Knight Frank, now overdue, at this stage, any of our plans can only be based on a one year cycle.

As a Councillor and Trustee, my sincere hope is that this Council and the Northwood House Charitable Trust can work together to ensure a suitable future for the House and Park.

Ann Thwaites
30.11.2010*