

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANEL 2

**Held on Thursday, 27 November 2008 at 10.00 am in
The Norfolk Room, Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Dereham**

PRESENT

Mrs J. Ball

Mr S.G. Bambridge

Mr M.J. Griffin

Mrs S.M. Matthews

Mr D.G. Mortimer

Mrs P. Quadling

In Attendance

Mark Broughton

Jonathan Collison

Sheila Cresswell

Lisa Hilton

Helen McAleer

Kevin J Taylor

Robert Walker

- Member Development and Scrutiny Officer
- Web Officer
- Member Services Officer
- Senior Marketing and Communications Officer
- Member Services Officer
- ICT Manager
- Sustainable Communities Manager

42/08 MINUTES (AGENDA ITEM 1)

In the absence of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, and after being duly proposed and seconded, Mr G Bambridge took the Chair.

The Member Development and Scrutiny Officer drew attention to a factual inaccuracy at Minute No. 38/08: it was actually the Strategic Director (Services) who had pointed out that members of the Community Development Team would shortly be making a tour of the District to publicise the kind of support available to smaller communities.

Subject to this amendment, the Minutes were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Sustainable Communities Manager then updated Members on publicity, saying that the Sports and Community Development Officers had recently held day long surgeries in each of the five market towns. Visitor numbers had varied but there had been a steady trickle, many of whom had been particularly interested in meeting officers to discuss funding opportunities for their groups or organisations. The team felt that the exercise, and their engagement directly with the community, had been very worthwhile and productive. Officers were keen to continue with these surgeries - perhaps monthly across the key towns throughout the year, rather than a concentrated session annually. Members agreed that this was a good idea and suggested that any such dates should be well publicised in neighbouring villages, as well as in the towns themselves.

43/08 APOLOGIES (AGENDA ITEM 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Kiddle-Morris and Councillor Claire Bowes.

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44/08 REVIEW OF COUNCIL WEBSITE (AGENDA ITEM 6)

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The Senior Marketing & Communications Officer presented the six-monthly update, supported by the ICT Manager and the Web Officer.

She started by drawing Members' attention to the new item which now appeared on the Council's home page: a one-click link to the "Keep Norfolk Local" campaign website.

She then pointed out that the website had been subjected to independent scoring by two bodies: "*Sitemorse*", which had concentrated on technical aspects; and the "*Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm)*", which had focussed on web page content. Each aimed to look at issues of best practice; to highlight weaknesses; and to give suggestions for improvements. Examples included drawing attention to broken links and the need to provide specialist provision for those with visual impediments etc. Many recommendations had already been, or were in the process of being, taken forward by the Council's website team.

The Web Officer drew attention to the *Sitemorse* score which was given in March 2008 and which ranked the Council's website as 135 out of 460. This was felt to be good, but the six month trial of this software had ended in April so the team were currently evaluating *Sitemorse* against other companies (some of whom offered a free service) in order to achieve best value future software support on a permanent basis.

The Senior Marketing and Communications Officer then presented key aspects of the Council's current web pages to Members, starting with the website statistics page which was up-to-date as at the end of October 2008. Among other things, this page illustrated the website's effectiveness i.e. a measurement of how visitors felt they were being served by the site. The score had been above 99% each month and the Council's website had received over 32,000 visitors up to the end of October. Members were also shown the list of top ranked pages – with the Home Page, Job Vacancies and Environmental Planning heading the list.

Returning to the report, attention was drawn to key improvements made over the last six months, as listed at para 4.2 on page 6 of the Agenda. Specific mention was made of the fact that the Lagan system had been made easier; an enhanced training programme for web editors was currently under way, as well as a register to ensure continuity of responsibility for each team whenever web editors moved on. Additionally, new items had been added to the A-Z list; further information about recycling was now listed; and wording on the homepage had been changed to make it clearer that a translation service was available.

In response to a query, the Web Officer explained that the Council did not receive payment for any links from our site which connected visitors directly to other sites (for example services provided by other Councils or organisations). However such links were considered a vital part of the signposting process for users and *Socitm* had stressed the key role which they played in terms of 'best practice' for Local Authority websites.

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The Senior Marketing and Communications Officer drew attention to the improvements made to the “Do it Online” page, including breaking items down into more user-friendly areas and ensuring that it was generally easier to navigate around the site. In response to recommendations, there was now a feedback facility at the bottom of the “Do it Online” page, which enabled visitors to link directly into a survey and which ensured that their comments were seen and recorded. Additionally a pop-up box, inviting comments, now appeared on screen (once only) at some point during each visit. This was a relatively new feature and it was too early to ascertain whether or not it was going to be a useful tool.

Appendix A to the report listed some feedback points which had been made by *Socitm* and detailed the progress made thus far to address some highlighted weaknesses. For example, it was now much easier to find details about the Statement of Accounts or Council Tax issues.

The Chairman made the point that great care should be taken about the use of acronyms and jargon, bearing in mind that visitors to the site may not be familiar with some of these. It was agreed that further work needed to be done in this area over the coming months.

With regard to the list of web editors, it was felt that it would be helpful for Members to have sight of this, possibly on their Extranet.

There followed some discussion about the fact that the depth and complexity of the site meant that it was always going to be difficult for everything to be kept entirely up-to-date. Keeping the site as current as possible was crucial: many visitors were deterred by factual inaccuracies as they inspired a lack of confidence. South Norfolk Council’s website was held up as being exemplary, but it was argued that whilst Breckland could aspire to such excellence, this was always going to be harder for us to achieve since South Norfolk had the advantage of a full time member of staff assigned specifically to this area of work. To a large extent therefore, the Council’s website was dependent upon members of the public or staff highlighting anomalies and drawing these to the attention of web editors. That said, in spite of various resource problems, work would continue on the re-design of the Council’s web pages.

The Chairman felt that it was certainly time for the Council’s home page to be updated. Citing the picture in the top left as an example, he said that it could be argued that this was not Breckland-specific.

The Web Officer explained that the picture was currently on a random roll around, working through a selection of photographs. The idea of a more topical photograph - for example relating to a key event such as welcoming home the troops – was one among several which could now be worked through the new test database, a tool which enabled officers to try out new ideas and templates before they went ‘live’. Other options and changes were currently being explored, such as removing some of the data on the home page and converting this into drop down menus across the top band. However it was pointed out that care would need to be taken with this since some visitors might not be familiar with the concept of drop down menus. Overall, it was agreed

**Lisa Hilton/
Jonathan
Collison**

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Jonathan
Collison**

that it would be a good idea to brighten up and refresh the page, whilst keeping within the accepted corporate colours.

The Web Officer said that the Communications team were planning to introduce custom images against each news item which could be easily updated. He said that he would arrange for Members to receive a screen image showing some of the ideas currently being explored.

The Planning site in particular had come in for some stark criticism. In spite of earlier promises and some initial ground work to enable planning applications to be viewed on the website, this project was currently frozen pending the decision on the future of the Planning Department. The ICT Manager said that they should have a steer on this in mid December.

The Chairman said that as internet access to the planning application process could be argued to be vital to the smooth running of some Council business, and since this was something which had initially been proposed five years ago, it was important to keep this under active review. He felt that if the result of current discussions meant further delays on website improvement, then this was something which should be specifically brought to the attention of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission in the near future.

Finally, there was some discussion about what was meant by the *Socitm* term "transactional ranking". This was the next level which the Council was aiming to achieve. The Web Officer explained that this related to the levels of "inter-activity" which a website offered. Examples now on our site included the new "Do it Online" pages and various feedback options, as well as the presence of more signposts for visitors. He drew Members' attention to the last sentence of Appendix A where the *Socitm* officer said that he "didn't think there were quite enough well presented transactions available to give our site a Transactional ranking". The Web Officer felt confident that recent and ongoing improvements should ensure that this higher rank would be reached at the next assessment.

The Chairman concluded by thanking the members of the team for their work and report, saying that he liked what they were doing and their future proposals.

RESOLVED

- (1) that the report be noted; and
- (2) to **RECOMMEND** to Overview and Scrutiny Commission that the development of the on-line planning application process should be kept under active review.

45/08 GIFTED AND TALENTED GRANT SCHEME - UPDATE (AGENDA ITEM 7)

The Sustainable Communities Manager presented this report.

He said that of the £10,000 set aside to support gifted and talented people in Breckland during the current Financial Year, each applicant

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could apply for a grant of up to £500 to help meet the extra expenses incurred by higher achievers as they progressed upwards in their field. Such a sum could be a real lifeline for some young people, helping them to meet their aspirations and potential.

Most of the nine successful applicants thus far were under 15 years old and there had also been an award to an adult disabled carriage driver who competed at international level. He pointed out that the imbalance of eight sports awards to only one arts award had been largely due to the fact that there had been a significant period during this year when the Council had been without an Arts Officer. However this imbalance should be redressed over the coming months as the new Arts Officer (Sam Dawson) was now in post.

The Sustainable Communities Manager confirmed that there was £5,500 left in the pot and there were at least three applications currently being processed. More applications were to be expected over the coming months, not least as a result of forthcoming promotions and publicity in *Breckland Voice*, as well as through the Pride in Breckland scheme, which aimed to celebrate local achievements.

He felt that this scheme had been a real success and one which the Council could be proud of. A further £10,000 had been put aside for this project under the Match Funding scheme for the next Financial Year.

A Member queried the status of a particular application and stressed the importance of Members, particularly Ward Members, being kept informed of the progress of any such applications.

The Sustainable Communities Manager said that he had checked the records and it appeared that whilst paperwork had been sent out to the young golfer in question, thus far no application had been received. However, he undertook to ensure that another set of application papers were issued. He stressed that all Gifted and Talented awards were made entirely on the basis of the necessary criteria being met: at no point did an applicant's background affect any decision.

**Sam
Dawson**

The Chairman, whilst accepting the need to take care about publicity whenever children were concerned, agreed that it would be useful for Members to know as a point of interest how the awards were distributed between towns and villages. He also agreed that Members, especially Ward Members, should be kept in touch with the progress of applications, subject to the agreement of their parents/guardians where appropriate.

There was concern at the disparity of awards between sports and arts, and the fact that the criteria for the former were so much easier to determine.

The Sustainable Communities Manager said that the new Arts Officer had re-examined the arts criteria and it was consequently expected that more awards would be made in this area over the coming months. He also explained that the Council's legal team had been consulted about levels of publicity with regard to children, and it was felt that where they were to be competing at county or country level, then a certain amount

of publicity was not only acceptable but possibly welcome as part of the process, albeit it would need to be handled sensitively.

He proposed that Members should receive an update on the progress made by each of the current successful grant applicants in a year's time.

The Chairman concurred, expressing his thanks and congratulations to the team: it was very important for the Council to be seen to be supporting youth and cultural needs within the District. If the pilot were judged to have been a real success, then this should be taken forward to the Executive at a later stage in order to ensure ongoing funding (not least as there could well be some serious sports potential in the District for the 2012 Olympic Games).

Finally, there was brief discussion about the importance of publicity (as mentioned above), bearing in mind the need to achieve a balance between raising levels of expectation against the hard fact that there would only be £10,000 available for sports and arts development grants next year.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

46/08 WORK PROGRAMME AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING (AGENDA ITEMS 8 AND 9)

The Member Development and Scrutiny Officer combined these two agenda items as he confirmed that this was the last meeting of the Policy Development and Review Panel 2.

He reminded Members that there would be a Scrutiny workshop on Tuesday 2 December, in Watton, during which future arrangements and the shape of Overview and Scrutiny within the Council, would be discussed. It was likely that Task and Finish Groups would take up some of the work currently covered by the three Panels.

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The meeting closed at 11.00 am

CHAIRMAN