

SCARBOROUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL
REVIEW OF PARKS NURSERY
MEETING WITH ADAS AND STAKEHOLDERS
17 MAY 2017 AT 2PM IN THE TOWN HALL

Present:

Cllr Dilys Cluer (in the Chair)
Cllr Guy Coulson
Cllr Tom Fox
Cllr Vanda Inman

SBC Officers

Nick Edwards, Director
St John Harris, Democratic Services Manager
Paul Thompson, Operations, Transport and Countryside Manager

ADAS Consultants

Chris Creed
David Talbot
Emma Worrall

Community Organisations

Bob Bennett, Friends of Pannett Park
Adrian Perry (and Chris Perry), Friends of South Cliff Gardens
Dorothy Russell, Friends of Falsgrave Park and Friends of Manor Road Nurseries
Amanda Smith, Whitby in Bloom

Apologies:

Cllr Tony Randerson
Friends of Dean Road and Manor Road Cemetery
Cayton in Bloom – submitted statement: *‘We are sorry we are not able to attend as we have found the help offered by staff and the plants that we have bought from the Nursery excellent. Also who will do the watering of our lamppost baskets - or will they have to be discontinued as a feature of the village if the nursery closes?’*

1. Cllr Cluer, Acting Chair of the Task Group welcomed all to the meeting and provided an introduction and update to the review
2. Mr Talbot introduced ADAS and summarised the scope of the review they had been asked to undertake.
3. Representatives of the four community organisations submitted their views to the meeting on their vision for the future supply of the Council’s plant requirement and related matters.

Dorothy Russell

- Contrary to the review specification document, she believes Manor Road Nursery is at maximum capacity
- She acknowledges the previous inefficiencies in the operation of Manor Road Nursery, but the nursery has since made improvements in every respect, particularly financial, by reducing its running costs
- Would prefer the nursery to remain at Manor Road
- Concerned at cost of moving nursery to Dean Road, but if it did, she would want the same size of facilities, not reduced
- MRN provides the best quality plants for Scarborough suitable for our coastal conditions. The high quality plants are a big part of the tourist draw
- The Council has tried to buy in plants before for a demonstration bed, but there were delays, and the provider could not get the bed right
- Her Friends Groups use the facilities at MRN for their annual Halloween event – pumpkin carving and storage for costumes
- Her Friends Groups help MRN staff on school visits. Children get involved in hands-on activities. Very educational.
- Dean Road does not provide enough space, for example for these hands-on activities
- MRN provides plants for Falsgrave Park suited to environmental conditions. MRN staff take cuttings and propagate them. MRN staff give support for their four annual events and the preparation meetings. How could this support continue if the plants were outsourced?
- Three learning disabled volunteers at MRN. They have a good rapport with staff. Very important community aspect of MRN.

Adrian Perry

- Disposing of MRN does not make financial sense. The Manor Road facility would probably cost well over £1M to replace and that's not including the land value. How can the case be made to destroy a £1M asset in order to gain £800K in a land sale?
- Re outsourcing, it is a question of balancing the cost benefits and the risks of outsourcing against the current method of service delivery
- Currently the nursery supplies the bedding plants to meet the requirements for annual and seasonal bedding and perennials. A stock of heritage plants is maintained and cultivated to supply heritage planting throughout the Borough. This makes Scarborough displays unique and admired by locals and tourists alike.
- Manor Road nursery has historically worked with local schools, community groups and volunteers to add social value to the business.
- Looking to the future the nursery could also deliver the following products and services:
 - i The sale of ancillary plants to local plant suppliers;
 - ii The cultivation of shrubs utilising existing shrub stock.
 - iii To provide horticultural experience and training to apprentices recruited through apprenticeship schemes;
 - iv Act as a purchasing partner for local groups and clients to procure plants, trees and shrubs;
 - v Enable additional educational work and visits through engagement with local educational establishments;

- vi To work in partnership with other social enterprises to provide training and work experience to individuals as appropriate.
- vii Work with local community groups such as Friends groups.
- viii These concepts were taken on board by SBC when a new Management Plan was presented by Steve Reynolds after the last review but not fully implemented.

(Officer's comment: some aspects of the review have been implemented e.g greater use of cuttings, re-roofing parts of the glasshouses, and renewing the boilers)

- At the last review of the service other local authorities provided evidence in respect of outsourcing. Interviews were undertaken with Officers from the City of York Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council. A written response was also provided by Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council. All three councils had outsourced their supply of plants some years before and explained how "just-in-time" deliveries for the supply of plants worked in their councils. All emphasised the need to have a good relationship with their supplier and only the City of York had some storage area. The Task Group noted that none of the Councils maintained any heritage stock and had fewer flowerbeds than the Borough. Harrogate Borough Council was also contacted and as with Scarborough Borough, Harrogate Borough Council also maintained an in-house Nursery service and heritage stock. The representative from Harrogate summed up by saying that plants could be sourced through an external supplier but there were risks and flexibility and quality is compromised in doing so. It was highlighted that the comment made by several witnesses that once the Nursery closed it would be gone for good.
- If outsource, then we lose the expertise and practical skills. We lose flexibility. We lose a facility which is the envy of other authorities.
- Representing the interests of Friends of South Cliff Gardens a 52 acre site. The Friends of South Cliff Gardens work most Wednesday mornings with a team of 10+ volunteers and it is doubtful that this energy and enthusiasm can be maintained without the help and support of a strong core facility. I have no confidence that there can a successful outcome to the idea of shoehorning a second class service facility at Dean Road. The proposal to move there is ill conceived and smacks of tokenism. If the Parks & Gardens service is emasculated by the loss of a facility which is the envy of other towns then it will send a message out that Scarborough no longer prides its long floral heritage and we risk sliding into mediocrity.
- Oppose the move to sustainable planting. Seasonal planting attracts our visitors, who do not wish to see the parks looking like their gardens. Sustainable planting is labour intensive. Plants cannot just be left and it is difficult to keep sustainable beds under control in contrast to annual bedding e.g. St Martin's Square

(Cllr Coulson's comment: sustainable planting can combine well with annual bedding and heritage plants. Can do more sustainable planting, and still put on a good show and be a flagship area)

- In inhouse facility provides flexibility. Can respond quickly e.g if temperatures drop and a north-east wind destroys plants. Can an external provider respond as quickly?
- It should be noted that visits to Manor Road had reduced over the last few years due to a reduction in promotion of Nursery visits and staffing resources. This is a classic example of a service starved of resources and then identified as a weak organisation that cannot justify future investment. Yet it still has a great deal of public support and we are here to make our voice heard and defend this wonderful resource which is essential to a tourist town. Our council spends money on attracting the Tour de Yorkshire each year but we need to have an attractive place in which to hold the event and our nurseries are the key to making Scarborough the jewel on the Yorkshire coast.
- His Friends Group used MRN intensively during the development of the HLF bid
- Nursery service played big part in the renovation of the Rose Garden
- Annual visit by Friends Group to MRN. This is an impressive facility which motivates and inspires the volunteers. Serves an educational purpose. Volunteers come back from visit with ideas
- Friends Group wanted to reinstate the South Cliff Scots Pines. Bought 50 saplings which were nurtured at MRN before planting out
- His Friends Group is involved in the preparation of Stage Two of a Heritage Lottery Fund bid worth some £5m to revive South Cliff Gardens. The bid is to be submitted in February 2018 with a decision in June 2018. If the stage 2 bid is successful then work could start in early 2019. With the support of MRN we feel reasonably confident that we can bring this project to fruition. Would not want to see any change that would put the project at risk.

Amanda Smith

- Mrs Smith read out the following statement:

'I have been a member of Whitby in Bloom for ten years and the chair for five years, for all that time it has been a constant battle to balance the books whilst maintaining an environment that people enjoy. The problems are not only those of constant economic pressures but also those of making sure our input improves environmental resilience and delivers pleasure to locals and visitors alike. Whitby in Bloom believes that sustainability and environmental issues are vitally important both locally and globally. As a group, we have concluded that perennial planting needs to be supported by the judicious use of annual planting. Seasonal bedding plants provide the colour and a wow factor which perennials cannot and perennials provide structure and year-round interest that annuals cannot.'

You may notice I have avoided the term sustainable, in my experience both annuals and perennials have advantages and disadvantages in the sustainability stakes. Whitby has a very challenging climate, we face due North, have a lot of salt laden arctic winds, our soil is waterlogged in the winter and arid in summer. Harsh conditions narrow our choice of perennials and we often need to provide intensive support to those we have planted, for example, water and staking in the summer and wind protection in the winter. The demands they place on environmental resources is increased and their life span is decreased bringing the environmental and economic costs of annuals and perennials together.'

The management skills of sustainable planting schemes require a high level of horticultural skills and experience. In Spring and Summer gardeners are required to:

- Apply mulch for moisture retention and weed control*
- Weed and control pests and diseases*
- Apply fertiliser*
- Stake plants*
- Water*
- Dead-head*

In Autumn and Winter

- Dead head*
- Cut and prune*
- Lift and divide*
- Protect against storm conditions*
- Assess for over maturity and plan for succession planting.*

Horticultural beds in all forms have a cost and yet as Chris Evans Nursery Manager and Horticultural Officer for Bournemouth Borough Council says

“If they create civic pride, give pleasure to people, keep horticultural skills alive and enhance our green spaces, surely there is a space for them”

So if we accept that a mix of annuals and perennials is desirable to maintain and enhance our environment, the question becomes where and who should grow them? We could farm out the responsibility to commercial growers but we would lose so much and the gains if any are so uncertain.

A Borough Council in Hertfordshire recently did a cost analysis on supplying plants from their own central nursery against an external commercial nursery, they found that if paid solely for production and delivery there was small economic saving, however a neighbouring council, doing this, reported having problems with plant quality and the supply of replacement plants. They also experienced difficulties with unloading, sorting and holding plants once delivered. To alleviate these problems another adjacent council contracted out to a grounds maintenance company but this resulted in a near doubling of costs. To get the best terms both councils had to enter long term contracts. With a marginal economic gain from out sourcing comes a huge cultural loss. Closing the borough nurseries would be a loss to all ages from the school groups that visit to enhance their science lessons, through the work placements found for volunteers, to the Friends and in Bloom groups who source plants confident that they have been grown with experience and an understanding of local heritage and environmental challenges. A council owned nursery enables horticultural apprentices to gain experience in seed sowing, taking cuttings, grafting, growing on, potting up, hardening off and overwintering. It allows locally appropriate and heritage plants to be grown under indigenous conditions, gives extra capacity to cope with the unpredictable and reduces the carbon footprint. But perhaps most importantly is the ability of the council to control its affairs which engenders an engaged workforce and a sense of ownership and civic pride throughout the borough.

Whitby in Bloom believes that the balance of benefits overwhelmingly lies in favour of SBC maintaining nursery capacity such that it can propagate and maintain a wide

range of annual and perennial plants. We believe that the Dean Road site alone would be too small to meet this brief.

Our group would favour a three-site solution, one site in the North of the Borough (Whitby), one in the centre (Scarborough) and one in the South of the Borough (Filey). We believe that this division would best facilitate the use of volunteers to keep costs to a minimum. As a Bloom group one of the biggest challenges we face is access to growing and over-wintering space, we could buy and recycle many more plants, reducing costs, if we had the facilities to grow them on and we could experiment with a wider range of plants if we had sheltered seasonal storage for them. We would require a high specification automatic irrigation and ventilation systems to minimise daily requirements but would be willing to fund-raise to help. A more local nursery facility would also expand on the educational benefits, with easier access for more schools and out of school groups. It would further reduce the carbon footprint and would provide quicker, convenient access for the local workforce. It would increase civic pride and plants could be 'Whitby Born and Bred'. Five years ago, at another nursery review I stated that the question was not could we afford to keep a nursery but rather could we afford to lose a nursery. Since then the importance of horticulture to the health and well-being of our society has been increasingly recognised. We stand to lose so much by out-sourcing or simply reducing this nursery provision, once a skill bank has been lost it can never be replaced. At a time of growing civic independence and climatic upheaval we need horticulturalists, we need plant nursery capacity. Once again, the question is not can we afford nursery provision the question is can we afford to live without it.'

- Whitby in Bloom visited MRN twice last year in spring and summer for educational purposes. They gained much. Also she undertakes visits to source plants for use by Whitby in Bloom. Excellent range of plants available.
- Mrs Smith is not familiar with Dean Road Depot, but she is not opposed to the move in principle provided there is sufficient space. She would prefer a site closer to Whitby (three site solution).
- Whitby in Bloom works closely with MRN staff e.g in provision of hanging baskets. Staff do a great job.
- Outsourcing would reduce flexibility. If a storm is imminent, then inhouse staff can keep plants protected until the weather has improved.
- There is one glasshouse in the Borough Council depot in Whitby which is used by the Nursery service, although the volunteer groups have no access to it.
- Uncertainty about the future of the Nursery service is affecting staff morale. The gardeners work very hard and take huge pride in what they do.

Bob Bennett

- MRN should be developing, not closing c.f. Leeds City Council which provides a public garden centre with the nursery. Why can't the same be done in the Borough? Commercialisation of the Nursery service needs to be considered.
- Friends of Pannett Park have a very positive experience of MRN. The facilities provide excellent training opportunities

- Enjoyable and educational visits to MRN by his Friends Group (with Whitby in Bloom twice a year)
- Locally grown plants reduce the carbon footprint and allow better control of the growing, timing and the quality of plants
- Aldby Nurseries provided the plants for the Floral Clock in Whitby. Inferior quality. Would not like to repeat the experience.
- Important heritage stock of geraniums at MRN needs to be safeguarded

(Adrian Perry: commercial nurseries charge a premium for heritage geraniums. Visitors appreciate the unusual geraniums. Tourist value and financial benefits of retaining the heritage stock)

(Amanda Smith: we do have a unique plant heritage asset in the Borough. Trying to establish a heritage orchard in Whitby)

4. Cllr Cluer advised that on the basis of ADAS's findings and other evidence gathered, the Task Group aimed to report to the O&S Board on 5 July and then to the Cabinet later that month.