

Coastal Users Group
6pm, Tuesday 6th September 2023
Muriel Matters House
Minutes

Present:

Christine Boulton Lane, Chair and WHBUA
Yasmin Ornsby – Stade Partnership
Nick Fawcett – 1066 Board Riders
Matt McDonnell – Hastings Bike Project (formerly Bike Lab)
Tim McDonald – Shipwreck Museum
Hugh Richardson – RNLI
Peter Wheeler – Hastings Canoe Club / 1066 Sea Swimmers
Chris Richards – Hastings Adventure Golf
Cllr Karl Beaney – HBC Cllr
Cllr Tony Collins – HBC Cllr
Aaron Woods, Abbie Tucker Williams, and Sarah French (notes) – HBC

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Apologies were received from:

Steve Peak – Friends of Hastings County Park
James Cook – Protector – Foreshore Trust (FST)
Melanie Clarke – Hastings and St Leonards Sailing Club
Anne Scott – Fishermen’s Museum/Old Hastings Preservation Society
Di Cooke – Hastings Voluntary Lifeguards (online)
Cliff Meaden – Hastings Windsurfing/EPIC Life
Cllr Julia Hilton – HBC Cllr

Nine vote holding attendees are required under the constitution. It was explained that, given the absentees, the meeting was not quorate, and no votes could be taken on items, though members agreed that items could be proposed and voted on at following meetings. Therefore, the meeting did not continue as planned, before starting the agenda a discussion took place:

It was suggested by Yasmin that poor attendance is down to discontent about the current role of the group as an advisory board to the FST, who are yet to publish overdue accounts. This was unanimously agreed by the group and Nick elaborated further about how the CUG is used to ‘rubber stamp’ decisions already made. Chris proposed that the group withdraw from the advisory group function and return to work as a group independently from the FST or council. It is felt that CUG is being used as a consultation ‘tick box’ for the trustees’, and that the group is not working as originally intended.

Peter suggested that CUG not meet again until the audited FST accounts are published, and CUG members have been given reasonable time to look at them.

Chris noted that there is no breakdown of the allocation of FST/HBC time. Abbie mentioned that this was an item on the agenda.

Aaron reminded attendees that the FST is not bound by any feedback given, and the CUG is not a decision-making group, but there to consult only on certain elements. Chris acknowledged this but stated that advice is not being sought and when it is, it is being ignored. Chris said that the group was only engaged reactively rather than proactively, that no feedback is provided to the group after charity committee meetings.

Tony Collins asked if this publishing of the accounts was a FST or HBC accounting problem and reiterated that this was a national problem across local authorities, resulting from a lack of accredited auditors.

Chris replied by saying that no provisional accounts have been shared. Therefore, there is no

transparency about what is included in the budgets/accounts. Abbie advised that she has requested the budget from the HBC finance dept but is still awaiting further information. Aaron noted that a finance update for the current year was attached with the agenda. Chris responded that these were too vague to be helpful – figures from previous years are still shown as estimates rather than actuals, language is used that is not clear, and that a finance officer should be present at CUG to explain and answer queries. Yasmin questioned how grants can be given out if budgets are only being estimated. Chris proposes that at the next meeting there is an update of accounts from an appropriate officer.

Karl Beaney suggested that the FST should be separate from HBC with independent trustees. Aaron suggested that there is intention for the FST to operate more independently in the future. Aaron added that the Charity committee meeting in March is where the FST financial plan update will be discussed.

Yasmin noted that in previous years, more councillors would attend these meetings, and relevant senior staff from HBC.

Chris does not want the minutes of this meeting to be sanitised, the minutes should reflect the strength of feeling in the group about the dissatisfaction felt regarding involvement with the FST and not being heard by HBC.

Nick reiterated that the minutes should strongly state that there is an intention to disband the CUG from the advisory function if changes are not made and the group's feedback is not heard.

Tony Collins observed that this is a strong and valuable group, and Chris suggested that the group might be better meeting as a lobby group in the future, rather than as an FST advisory group, but this would be a disappointing move away from a partnership approach.

Tim stated that he does not want to attend again unless changes are made, and accounts are published and the group is listened to.

Christine shared her frustration with issues regarding the publishing of FST accounts, amusements and Southern Water, as major issues affecting the coast and town.

A vote was taken among members present with proposal to: Withdraw from the advisory functions of the trust unless significant improvements are made by the next meeting. All voted in favour. Nick advised that will not be attending the next meeting.

Aaron asked for confirmation for the record that the required improvements were:

1 – Publishing of the signed off audited accounts

2 – Proper time to review the published charity committee agenda moving forwards, as one week with a CUG in the middle is not sufficient, there should be a minimum of 2 weeks

3 – That relevant officers attend in the future to discuss the items relevant to them – Most common items relate to Estates, Legal & Finance

The group agreed unanimously.

Yasmin added that four current academic reports were being worked on about the decline of coastal communities, and the shame collectively felt about seeing the lack of progress in the town.

2. AGENDA ITEMS DISCUSSED

At 18:55 the group moved on to the main agenda

Kevin's Replacement

Kevin's head of service role is not being replaced like-for-like. Aaron has coastal and commercial services responsibilities. Victoria Conheady has strategic tourism responsibilities. Abbie's role is now 100% FST, rather than HBC. Aaron will be the lead officer for CUG going forward but recognises that there needs to be attendance from relevant senior officer for relevant items.

There was a collective request for representation from Finance, Estates and Legal depts to attend the next meeting.

Discussion took place regarding ways to give feedback proactively, Aaron advised that this is available through these quarterly meetings, and that feedback can also be given directly via Abbie at any time.

Yasmin mentioned issues about Open Space including lighting and pop-ups. Aaron responded by saying that these are part of the next business plan, lighting is quoted at £20k, pop ups at £30k. Aaron advised that the forward plan for HBC is currently published until April 2024, Foreshore Trust financial plan is scheduled for March meeting as previously mentioned, but items that the group wants to see brought forward can be fed back proactively at any time.

The group want to be able to advise before and not comment after.

Aaron confirmed the feedback from this meeting will be going to the FST charity commission on Monday 11th December.

Christine stated that the FST needs to be operated within charity law, and that the council need to ensure this is being done.

Southern Water update

A copy of the Southern Water update was circulated. This is attached with the minutes. There was discussion about SW's intention to leave the pumps on the seafront for six months, and the group requested SW do this neatly so that the promenade remains accessible, and that the pathway is reinstated. Aaron advised that SW were undertaking hydraulic modelling of the town, and that pumps would likely remain in place in the interim to protect against flooding.

Christine stated that the beach hut toilets at West of Haven are still not fixed by SW. The entire site needs to be reinstated by SW. Nick added that this includes the multi-purpose track that needs to be made good again, as it currently submerged. Aaron advised that this would be discussed at an upcoming meeting in January with SW and WHBUA.

Aaron cautioned that SW can use emergency powers under the water industry act to carry out work without the involvement of HBC, therefore the council are not always involved in agreeing works, other than where done 'under consent'. HBC were asked to be proactive in consulting with SW and getting areas reinstated.

3. Member Updates

Tim (Fishermen's Museum) commented on inaction from the council for its support of tourism businesses, including making changes to the Rock-a-Nore car park. Added that the museum has offered to acquire one of the Hastings lifeboats recently refused planning permission elsewhere as new exhibit.

The RNLI advised that per Aaron's report it was a successful summer, there were not too many incidents, especially as less people were in the water due to the weather and SW, new volunteers but difficulty with recruiting seasonal staff. Aaron advised he would take questions on the report later on the agenda.

Matt raised concerns about jellyfish populations, this is being discussed on an international level (they are affecting nuclear plants) and may be a concern in the future.

Peter Wheeler requested for steps onto the beach at Rock-a-Nore as there is now a significant drop, and has noticed that charging car park fees from 7am is having a negative effect on swimmers. Peter also commented on Hastings Pier financial issues and total lack of support from HBC despite multiple letters to the chief exec. Peter says HBC is also a major creditor but appears to have written off over £30k owed, and not supported other creditors with recovery. Following tribunal peter and another worker were awarded £85k, but the owner liquidated the company, so nothing was paid, and tribunal costs exceeded

£10k. Now the owner is making token gestures by replacing support trusses that do not need to be but not attending to the other maintenance.

Hastings Adventure Golf is 15% down on takings compared to last year, and 12% up on costs. 30 full time staff, 30 seasonal staff is the normal complement. Again, difficult to recruit seasonal staff. Restructuring for next year to work with a smaller base of more full time and less seasonal staff. The planned development is stalled due to financial reasons and will not go ahead unless project costs are lowered to under £3.5m. Next winter build is looking unlikely, therefore the designs may be adapted, and a two-phase design may be implemented so that it does not affect the season.

1066 board riders have had a consistent year. Now is peak time for locals. Commented on the sharp shingle left by SW already discussed earlier.

Yasmin HFPS: Oxford University have been commissioned to do a report on the seal colony at Fairlight. Significant numbers of seals causing problems by targeting catch and eating only the liver. There is also a fisheries management plan and report on Kelp ongoing.

Matt: Successful summer for the bike project, a CIC since 2021. Rehoming bikes has been successful, they have been meeting new residents, and are building plans for future following new lease with HBC. There is a clear demand for bike hire for tourists which is being explored. They have a planning application in to amend the exterior of the space. New signage and mural by local artists is having a positive impact.

Aaron advised that a post-storm survey was commissioned to assess impact of recent storms. The survey has confirmed that in some areas beach was eroded, but losses were not as significant as predicted. There had been no coastal flooding (overtopping). The beach in front of the car park at Rock-a-Nore is close to its lowest ever levels, as Peter had mentioned. One reason for this is that the waves hit the now exposed concrete blocks and act as a funnel. Plan to relocate the blocks closer to the sea wall in the new year or carry out other works. The survey showed Stade Beach is 'healthy'. The 'sluice' can be removed to let more shingle through, but this appears to now be happening naturally.

Next Friday 15th December short-term protection work starts. This includes clearing shingle from Marina through to Bottle Alley, and reprofiling the beach in front. This will prevent overtopping and clear the soakaway drains. The works should provisionally be completed by 20th December. The paths will hopefully remain clear over the Christmas period. In response to a question on funding Aaron advised that this is on FST land, but it is a statutory responsibility of HBC to maintain the area. Funding for this has come from DEFRA to maintain coastal defences, efficiencies on last project allow for a residual funding pot ringfenced for coastal protection.

The Environment Agency have announced bathing quality status, the same results are retained from last year. There is 'Good' water quality at Pelham, 'Excellent' at Marina.

4. Foreshore Trust Charity Committee Agenda

Aaron explained the detail of the report recommending renewal of the RNLI contract, including running through the headline points about the number of people engaged with. Aaron explained that in its simplest terms no other provider can give trust the same level of provision and protection at the same or better value, and that the RNLI service had been exceptional. The group agreed with the report recommendations.

The group had earlier advised that they were unable to comment on the paper on the trust finance update as they had not been given appropriate time and the detail was too vague.

5. Any feedback from issues arising since the last meeting

covered above

6. Date of next meeting

TBC March before the next planned charity committee.

Christine expressed thanks to attendees of the meeting and wishes to see the CUG continue in the future in an appropriate way.

Meeting ended 19:55.