

At a meeting of the Taunton Deane Borough Council held in the Principal Committee Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday 23 July 2002 at 6.30pm.

Present: The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey)  
The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Govier)  
Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Mrs Biscoe, Bishop, Mrs Bradley, Bulgin, Cavill, Cudlipp, Dawson, Debenham, Denington, Eckhart, Edwards, Escott, Farbus, Floyd, Gill, Guerrier, Hall, Henley, Mrs Hill, Horsley, House, Lee, Lees, Mrs Lewin-Harris, Mrs Lippiatt, Lisgo, Meikle, Mrs Miller, Mullins, Murphy, R Parrish, Mrs Parrish, Partington, Paul, Phelps, Miss Phippen, Slattery, Stone, Vail, Warren and Williams

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings of the Council held on 8 May, 10 June and 27 June 2002, a copy having been sent to each Member, were signed by the Mayor subject to (a) Minute 14 (8 May 2002) being amended to include reference to Councillor Meikle's term as Leader of the Council from 1974-1991 and (b) Minute 2 (10 June 2002) being amended by the deletion of Miss Phippen's recorded vote against and it being included under Minute 3.

2. Apologies

Councillors Mrs Angus, Bone, Croad, Squier, Tolchard, Watson and Mrs Whitmarsh.

3. Public Question Time

Mrs J Hookings, a resident of Swingbridge, Bathpool drew attention to flooding problems at her property. This issue had previously been raised by her at a meeting of the Executive in July 2002. At that time Mrs Hookings had been informed that the Environment Agency were investigating this problem. She informed the Council that she had not yet heard the outcome of the investigations and that no action had been taken to resolve the situation. She appealed to councillors to help find a satisfactory solution.

Councillor Mullins replied that the report from the Environment Agency had been received that day and a copy would be forwarded to Mrs Hookings. He would address the issues contained in Mrs Hookings' question in a detailed written response.

4. Councillor Croad

The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey) reported that Councillor Croad was currently unwell. It was agreed that the best wishes of the Council be sent to Councillor Croad for a speedy recovery.

5. Recommendations to Council

The following recommendations were considered:-

(a) Best Value Performance Plan

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that the Best Value Performance Plan (a copy of which had been circulated to members) be approved.

(b) Brewhouse Theatre Professional Indemnity Claim

Reported that the Brewhouse Theatre had been pursuing a claim for Professional Indemnity against a firm of architects employed to carry out a lottery funded refurbishment and extension in 1997. An offer of £65,000 compensation had been received which the Brewhouse Board now wished to accept. There were however three claims on the use of the settlement including one by this Council.

To overcome the conflict concerning the use of money, the Brewhouse Panel had suggested that the Brewhouse Theatre should pay the Council the £65,000 and that the Council should then immediately re-grant £65,000 to the Brewhouse Theatre in order that it could (a) cover its legal fees and expenses and (b) purchase the most vital items of outstanding equipment from the Lottery Project to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and Health and Safety issues.

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that a grant of £65,000 be made to the Brewhouse Theatre in accordance with the method suggested.

(c) Capital Strategy 2002

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that the Capital Strategy 2002 be adopted.

(d) Asset Management Plan 2002

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that the Asset Management Plan 2002 be approved.

(e) Statement of Accounts 2001/02

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the main Statement of Accounts 2001/02 be approved.
- (ii) the following determinations be made in respect of the year ended 31 March 2002:-

1. Section 42(2)(g)

that £1,157,711 of expenditure for capital purposes, which was financed by grant, be capitalised.

2. Section 56(i)

that basic and supplementary credit approvals of £1,034,240 (after adjustment for capital and grants received) be treated as authority to charge to capital accounts expenditure of that amount.

3. Section 60(2)

that £2,166.845 of usable receipts be applied to meet capital expenditure.

4. Section 63(i)

that £654,336 be put aside from the revenue accounts in 2001/02 as a provision for credit liabilities.

(f) Taunton Tennis Centre Expansion

On the motion of Councillor Henley it was RESOLVED that:-

- (a) a Supplementary Estimate from General Fund Reserves for £318,275 (+ irrecoverable VAT) be made, and
- (b) an application be submitted to the Sport England Lottery Fund for the balance of the project cost.

(g) Hillfarrance Flood Alleviation Scheme

On the motion of Councillor Mullins it was RESOLVED that additional funding towards the Hillfarrance Flood Alleviation Scheme be agreed and a supplementary estimate from reserves of £64,500 be made.

(h) Housing Strategy and Business Plan

On the motion of Councillor Stone it was RESOLVED that he be granted delegated authority to submit the Council's Housing Strategy and Business Plan to the Government after being guided by the recommendations of the joint meeting of the Executive and Housing Review Panel on 24 July 2002.

6. Reports of the Leader of the Council and Executive Councillors

(a) Leader of the Council (Councillor Horsley)

(i) Councillor Debenham asked the following question:-

In view of the new openness of the local Freemason's Lodge and its wish to be much more normally engaged in local, social and civic affairs, could it now be voluntarily ascertained which of our present councillors are Freemasons and this list be made public and also circulated to councillors?

Councillor Horsley replied:-

As members will be aware, the high ethical standards which we as councillors work under have recently been updated in our Code of Conduct. Part of the code requires all councillors to register those financial and non-financial interests which are defined in the Code. The Register does not require membership of private clubs to be declared. If individual councillors wish to declare such memberships - they are, of course, free to do so in the Register.

Naturally when individual items of business are being transacted, each councillor needs to assess whether any relationship - or membership of a club - would amount to a 'personal' or 'prejudicial' interest.

(ii) Report of Councillor Horsley

It has been a momentous three months since full Council last met - excluding the special meetings we have had for Wellsprings and Cotford St Luke. The following three months seem equally likely to bring major items to our attention. We also have the problem of the pay award and the likely impact of the strike called for Wednesday 17 July. I will report on this at the meeting.

Wellsprings Centre

Wellsprings is a first priority for us to get up and running and I strongly deprecate those who have been critical in the press about the situation. I promised at the special council meeting at the suggestion of Councillor Tony Floyd that there would be an enquiry into the problems. I set out the main questions that would have to be answered in the Weekly Bulletin on 29 June and I think it is premature of the opposition to jump to conclusions ahead of the enquiry. Their speculation is unhelpful. They would be doing the Council a better service if they devoted their time and expertise to assisting us all rather than trying to prejudge the outcome of the enquiry.

### Best Value Performance Plan

The main attention has focused on services and the publication of the Best Value Performance Plan which is being ratified on 23 July pays tribute to the hard work and devotion of our staff to their tasks. I am pleased that the Government has recognised the extraordinary effort that goes into preparation of Best Value and now sees it in a more strategic light than before. However it doesn't alter the fact that the report runs to 164 pages, huge by any standards. Over 50 pages are devoted to Performance Indicators (Part 3 and part of Part 7) and other measures a lot of which have been discarded but because of the prescriptive nature of the legislation have still to be calculated. How difficult it is to convince members of the public that we take rises in Council Tax seriously when we have to spend so much on producing this kind of report!

### South West Regional Chamber

At the South West Regional Chamber on Friday 12 July we debated the SWARMMS report, the decision was taken by 45 votes to 11 to upgrade the A303/30 to dual carriageway status. This puts it on a par with the A358 option, the preferred choice of the consultants and the panel that advised them. This could have very serious consequences for Taunton Deane.

We will not be 'on par' in reality as there is a chance that the Department will choose not to 'trunk' the A358 and the £3 billion set aside for the South West will go elsewhere. There is likelihood that this could hamper our economic growth if we cannot get the M5 junction improvements. We have to strive to ensure that the Highway Agency and Department of Transport take seriously our Principal Urban Area status. I will develop this argument further at full council.

The South West Regional Chamber also welcomed the White Paper 'Your Region, Your Choice'. Our discussions at the Members Briefing session on 8 July were helpful. There was a debate about the decoupling of local government reform to bring about unitary authorities from the referendum on setting a directly elected regional chamber.

I am strongly of the view that if we want devolved powers from central government via a Regional Assembly then to win a referendum we will have to convince the public that we are not adding another tier of government overall.

The Chamber accepted an amendment of mine that representation should be a minimum of one constituency-based member per approximately 100,000 of the electorate and asked the officers to research this alongside other 'fair' methods of representation.

### Vision for Taunton

The Vision for Taunton is reaching its climax. It is meeting for its penultimate session on 22 July and I will be able to report to the Council how it is progressing. I have circulated my views on this to all of you and I welcome any comments on this from you.

What is important is that the outcome is seen as *ours*. We joined with the County on this and have used their facilities but this was our initiative and must remain with us to share with all who will help to make the Vision come about.

### Residents' Parking

Residents' parking is working; we need to review the times, the knock-on effects in other areas arising from displacement and the whole question of commuter parking. We will engage with the County about some of their measures for delivering the Local Transport Plan. There is concern that the Inner Relief Road is again slipping behind in the likely delivery date. We are all aware of the bus problem and the ineffectiveness of the buses offering a viable alternative to the private car in our semi-rural area.

### Future of Housing

The long term future of municipal housing is again before us. Phil Stone will no doubt be reporting in more detail on this in his portfolio but my initial view on the HACAS Chapman Hendy report is not exactly ecstatic.

### Forward Plans

We are already putting together our Forward Plans for the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the portfolio holders have all been in discussion with their lead officers to update their Corporate Priorities for next year's budget. We would like to test some of the ideas with the community ahead of council tax fixing and will involve the Local Strategic Partnerships in the process where appropriate.

There is much evidence of partnership working across the different interests in the community whether health, education, police or social services. What we want is firm action. We don't want distractions and disagreements from amongst us to slow achievement. We are proud of our Council and will extol its virtues as loud and long as we can.

(b) Planning Policy and Transportation (Councillor Bulgin)

(i) Councillor Slattery asked the following question:-

Would the Portfolio Holder agree to seek the necessary amendment to the Traffic Regulation Order forbidding vehicles over 2m in height or carrying advertising material other than company or business logos from visiting or parking in any of the Taunton Deane Borough Council car parks?

Councillor Bulgin replied that he would support this type of amendment which would give greater powers to control the abuse of our car parks. He would immediately look at how this could best be achieved and start the formal amendment process, which would involve advertisement of the proposed changes.

(ii) Report of Councillor Bulgin

Restructuring of the Planning Section to make sure lines of reporting responsibility is taking place on the lines of the recommendations from the Planning Working Group and Review Panel. It is anticipated that this will speed up the processing of planning applications and reduce the workload on the Planning Committee, it will also provide more adequate checks on applications which will hopefully avoid any recurrence of the problem experienced at Stoke St Gregory recently.

The final elements of the residents parking scheme is being completed - Cleveland Street and Portland Street areas. TRO panel recommend agreement and the scheme therefore will be implemented.

The Vision for Taunton had completed its investigations and their report is eagerly awaited.

The SWARMMS report has been received and as anticipated is generating considerable discussion. This is a golden opportunity for Taunton and if the Regional Assembly back the proposals made by this Council in its responses, then we will have the chance to resolve a major part of our transport problems as well as provide for the future development of Taunton.

The Couttie report was delivered recently and it poses some very serious questions for our housing requirements in the future, this is something that will have to be given consideration through the planning process and forward planning through the Strategic Plan Review Panel process.

I have met with Taunton Town traders, Town Centre Partnership, Chamber of Commerce and the Town Centre Manager recently. We have discussed traffic issues and the need for the park and rides and temporary parking sites during the proposed development of the Crescent Car Park and when it happens - Tangier.

(c) Economic Development, Property and Tourism (Report presented by Councillor Horsley in Councillor Croad's absence)

1. Tourism

I am pleased to report that positive steps have been made towards the creation of a more co-ordinated and coherent tourism strategy for Somerset.

The Borough and the Districts have formed a Portfolio Holders Group under the chairmanship of Alan Gloak of Somerset County Council. We are looking at unnecessary duplication, the sharing of best practice, particularly relating to the best value reviews and their outcomes.

Simultaneously the Way Forward Steering Group has been formed comprising representatives from the various operators within the industry. The Tourist Operators are represented on the Portfolio Holders Group by Graham Mottram and both Alan Gloak and myself are the Local Authority representatives on the Way Forward Steering Group, so there is plenty of cross fertilisation.

The Operators are presently involved in a data collection process examining how money is spent, duplication and how resources might be redirected. It will also aim to identify marketing and partnership opportunities. This Group are looking at suggestions for a logo with a strapline for Somerset Tourism for general use by both local authorities and the private sector.

2. Economic Development

The vision process is coming towards its concluding stages. The Commission have reviewed well over 100 submissions but it is possible to detect themes emerging from this mass of very strongly held views.

All Executive Councillors have been asked to review their corporate priorities and high on my list will be to work in co-operation with the RDA and developers to bring forward the development of Chelston House Farm which has been designated for employment use in the Local Plan. It is important that we have a serviced, strategic employment site to take advantage of the opportunities provided by Junction 26 being relatively under-utilised.

I was very surprised to learn at a recent meeting that some Wellington Town councillors were of the opinion that the location of any Agricultural Business Centre had already been determined. Can I use this report to make clear that the current study is only at an early stage and I remain highly optimistic that a site adjacent to Junction 26 could be the preferred site. Although I recognise that the first role of the feasibility study must be to consider whether such a centre is



economically viable wherever it is located and there is much evidence to be taken before the final outcome is known.

(d) Leisure (Councillor Henley)

Since the last full Council meeting the Leisure, Arts and Culture portfolio has been very busy. Looking forward we have had several projects centred round our parks. By the time of the Council meeting we will have had The Proms in the Park and The Pop in the Park concerts. So much work has gone into making these events a success so let's hope that things went well as these events do really show Taunton Deane in a positive light. I would like to thank Karen Dyson and Debbie Arscott of the Leisure Department for all the work they have done with planning and promoting these concerts. Also, by the time you read this we will have had the judging from Britain in Bloom in both Wellington and Taunton. I think both towns look very good and I wish both Britain in Bloom teams great success. The amount of community involvement and sponsorship vindicates the decision to appoint a Britain in Bloom co-ordinator and Shaun Cregan has been very pro-active in this role. Since the last Council meeting we had the Jubilee celebrations and the Parks Department and DLO did an amazing job getting the towns of Taunton and Wellington ready for the events. The Programme of Events in Wellington and Taunton parks has been good over the last few weeks and has been enjoyed by many, many people.

On the sports side, I was very pleased to hand over a cheque to the Carnival Committee for sponsorship of the Taunton 10K, which has become a major event over the years. Also on the sports side we are awaiting the result of a bid for extra funds for an extension of the Blackbrook Tennis Centre.

(e) Community Development (Councillor Lisgo)

1. Best Value Reviews

(i) Equality Issues

The Council is shortly to adopt a 'Race Equality Scheme' in line with its statutory duty to promote race equality. The Scheme is being developed as one aspect of a wide-ranging best value review of equality issues currently underway. The Race Equality Scheme will be in place in August 2002, while the wider review of equalities will be completed by December 2002.

(ii) Economic and Community Regeneration

A joint workshop was held on 15 July to consider these related issues and get feedback from key stakeholders. The review is scheduled to finish in April 2003.

2. Community Planning

The Local Strategic Partnership is meeting for a 'development session' on 17 July at Lyngford House to determine future common priorities. One aspect under discussion will be the creation of a district wide community strategy shared by all partners to guide future resource allocation throughout the borough.

3. Youth Issues

The 'Voice 24-7' Magazine has recently celebrated its second birthday and is continuing to provide a dynamic means of engaging young people. I will be discussing with officers the range of future possibilities that exist around the development of a Local Youth Council for the area.

4. Crime and Disorder Issues

(i) Parish Wardens

The first year of this initiative is now available and there are encouraging signs as outlined in recent press report. There is a clear reduction in reported crime.

(ii) Street Wardens

The new Street Wardens for Priorswood and Halcon started work at the end of May, and are settling in well into their new roles. My intention is that we build upon these schemes for the future.

5. Womens' Forum

The next meeting of the Forum will take place in the autumn at a time and date yet to be determined. This will be announced in a future issue of the Weekly Bulletin.

6. AGENDA 21 Issues

The Council has recently become an active partner in the 'Somerset Foodlinks' project. This initiative seeks to promote the economic, social, environmental and health benefits of producing and consuming local food. There are many projects aimed at consumers (for example box schemes, local food delivery) and producers alike.

7. Sure-Start

The Council is a key partner in this initiative, securing government funding to support children (0-4 years) and young families in the North

and East Taunton areas. A bid has been submitted to the Government and the local partnership for Sure-Start is now looking at sites in the area for new facilities needed to support children and young families.

(f) Environmental Services (Councillor Mullins)

Hillfarrance

Following a public meeting at the Anchor Inn, Hillfarrance in May, the Environment Agency gave a presentation on the status of the flood scheme at that time. It was clear to me that early action was required if the funding was to be secured in the form of grant-aid from DEFRA. With goodwill and haste from all the partners involved hopefully this can be secured.

The recommendation was presented to the June Executive for Taunton Deane's contribution towards this.

A few days later I received a letter from the 'Hillfarrance Action Group' thanking myself, the Executive (and the Council) for their long term support and commitment.

*This has to be one of the highlights of my term in office 'so far'.*

Doorstep Waste Recycling

I shall be signing the contract for this (together with the other Executive Councillors of the SWP) at Yeovil, in August.

The scheme will commence in October. It will start in Ruishton and Creech St Michael. This will allow us to analyse performance and resolve any operational issues prior to a managed roll-out across the Deane.

Briefings are planned for both parish councils prior to 'R' day.

Licensing Issues

I have been surprised that during the recent high profile licensing events, that is, 'The Full Monty', 'Spider Man' and the current 'new' stripper's application I have received very little communication from Councillors on these events.

I am always willing to hear your views (preferably before you share them with the press). With some issues this may save valuable councillor and officer time in discussing issues without the need for reference to the 'Licensing Board'.

(g) Housing Services (Councillor Stone)

1. Housing Strategy and Business Plan

The Housing Strategy and Business Plan is a matter which would normally be submitted to full Council for consideration and decision. However, because of timing problems and in order to allow discussion by the Tenants' Forum, it has not been possible to submit it to either the Executive or Council before tonight's meeting. Arrangements have therefore been made for a joint meeting of the Executive and the Housing Review Panel to consider the Strategy and Plan at a meeting to be held on 24 July 2002. The meeting is, of course, open for all Councillors to attend.

In order to comply with the timetable for submission of the Council's proposals it will be necessary for a decision to be made at that meeting. I am therefore requesting that Council grant me delegated authority to make a decision on this matter after being guided by the recommendations of the joint meeting of the Executive and the Review Panel.

A copy of the finalised Strategy and Plan will be submitted to all members of the Council.

This document is of vital importance to the Council's housing service over the coming three years and I look forward to the Council backing the plan through the required process.

2. The Chapman Hendy report on the future option for Taunton Deane's housing stock

There was a disappointing turnout from councillors to hear the presentation of the analysis carried out by Chapman Hendy of our so-called options for our housing stock. There was in fact far more of the Tenants' Forum members present than councillors.

I have attended many meetings during my long involvement with Housing on this Council and despite the problems inherent with trying to provide homes for those on a very long waiting list with inadequate resources I have mainly enjoyed those meetings. I found the Chapman Hendy presentation profoundly depressing. The Government in its usual top down, dictatorial style has laid down precise targets for all the key decisions in housing, including crucially the exact rent levels for the coming years, the standards to which our council houses have to be improved and the levels of investment required over future years to name but a few. The end result is that if we are to meet these targets, surprise, surprise, it will be difficult for us to retain our housing stock.

Here in Taunton we have managed by sustained investment over many years to maintain our council houses in a reasonable condition. Most

now have central heating, many have double-glazing and all are maintained on a rolling repair cycle.

If the new government targets mean that we have to explore different ownership and management arrangements in order to get access to the required investment finance then it would suggest that most councils throughout the country will be also forced down this route. Will council housing soon be a thing of the past?

I do not propose at this stage to comment much on the 'options' presented to us but it worth pointing out that other than transfer of the stock to a Housing Association the only other serious choice is the arm's length company. To even qualify for this option at present means passing yet another test set by the Government's obsessive target setters, the equivalent of a 'well-above average performing authority'. Our first task therefore is to concentrate our efforts on achieving that status so that we at least have another option.

The choice process promises to be a challenging one which I hope will be of great interest and concern to all councillors. As housing at last appears to be becoming a bigger issue on the political stage perhaps we can hope that the Government will in the coming months start to recognise the desperately needed social housing rather than putting so much effort into forcing ownership changes through financial manipulation.

(Councillor Stone arrived at the meeting at 6.52 pm.

The following councillors left the meeting at the times indicated:- Councillor Dawson at 7.40 pm, Councillor Warren at 7.50 pm, Councillor Cudlipp at 7.55 pm, Councillor R Parrish at 8 pm, Councillor Cavill at 8.40 pm, Councillor Mrs Hill at 9.25 pm, Councillor Govier at 9.40 pm, Councillors Mrs Parrish, Mrs Biscoe and Escott at 10 pm, Councillors Paul, Lee and Gill at 10.15 pm, Councillor Debenham at 10.30 pm, Councillor Slattery at 10.35 pm and Councillor Bishop at 10.45 pm).

(The meeting ended at 10.50 pm).

