

## **COUNCIL MEETING - 14 OCTOBER 2003**

### **RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL** **COUNCILLOR WILLIAMS – LEADER OF THE EXECUTIVE**

#### 1. Leisure Trust - Virement

The original date for the commencement of the new leisure trust, which is to be called Tone Leisure, was October 2003. This allowed a nine-month implementation period which could result in maximising savings during the set up year. As the project has progressed the following issues have caused some delays.

- The transfer of leases on Blackbrook, Wellsprings and Castle
- Complications surrounding the most appropriate form of trust following the Governments' latest proposals
- Some general slippage due to the volume of work/impact of other corporate projects

As a result, the project team and external leisure and legal advisors have recommended that the start dated should now be 1 January 2004. The financial impact of this change is £60,000 although this can be funded from within the existing approved budget.

The Executive have considered this matter and agree that the start date should be revised in accordance with the recommendation of our advisors.

It is therefore RECOMMENDED that £60,000 be vired from the Partial Exemption VAT Reserve to the Leisure Trust set up budget, subject to the successful completion of the scheduled VAT inspection in September 2003.

Councillor J R Williams

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### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR WILIAMS – LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

May I take this opportunity of welcoming Penny James as our new Chief Executive to this our first formal Full Council since officially having taken up the position only three weeks ago. We have many challenges ahead and I look forward to meeting these with the sound advice and guidance that has been amply demonstrated to date and secure in the knowledge this will continue in the future. Much has changed since 1 May and, I suspect, will continue to change as we evolve to meet the challenges referred to above, but it is a credit to our Officers that these changes are absorbed and implemented without visible loss of service to our customers, the public at large.

I was particularly proud that we were able to offer the Freedom of the Borough to 40 Commando Royal Marines on the 8 September and it was a wonderful to see them exercise that freedom the following day when they marched through the town, it was a magnificent sight. Also gratifying was the public support for the event with the pavements filled to overflowing to watch the band and Marines march past. A memorable occasion indeed.

#### Overview

There is much happening in Taunton Deane at present, and the high level of activity is consuming much member and officer time. , The major initiatives are the Vision for Taunton process, Urban Extension Study, analysis of the Local Plan Inspectors report, relocation of the livestock market, redevelopment of the High Street area, completion of Wellsprings Sports Centre, means of reducing traffic congestion and improve public transport, housing stock transfer, setting up the Leisure Trust and implementing the Licensing Act. At Wellington we are pursuing proposals to regenerate Cornhill and to achieve preservation of the all important listed Tonedale Mill Buildings and remaining original machinery. Not least we have commenced the budget setting process with the inevitable grim news from our Head of Finance that we are spending beyond our means. Most of these important initiatives will no doubt be covered by the relevant Portfolio Holder but I will comment on a few.

#### Terence O'Rourke Study

Work is proceeding apace with design work for the urban renewal and regeneration, urban extension study, transport review, and now the town centre design encompassing the High Street proposed redevelopment and proposals for a cultural area centred on the Castle Green area. Initial plans for the urban renewal and regeneration have been presented to Councillors and our Partners and in general these have been well received. The proposals are imaginative and exciting and augur well for the future economic

development of Taunton Deane. I must however, temper any exuberance for these plans with the health warning that “deliverability” will be the key to success, or failure, and for this we are only the enablers, we must use all our influence and powers to bring our present and prospective partners to the table to ensure delivery.

The proposals are the subject of public consultation later this month and it will be very interesting to receive feedback from this exercise.

With regard to deliverability, our major partners, South West of England Regional Development Agency are carrying out consultation as to how best to progress the development of Taunton and as a preliminary stage are proposing a high-level Advisory Board be formed comprising key public and private organizations and interests. I will know more about these proposals following a meeting on 21 October 2003 to explore possibilities in readiness for completion of the masterplanning process. I am cautious about these proposals until more detail is known as I would not wish to see the development of Taunton as proposed removed from the control of this Council.

#### Wellsprings Sports Centre

I am pleased to report that the works are proceeding well and completion by Christmas 2003 looks feasible at this stage, I believe we are now past the worst in terms of the budget and it does look as though we should be able to achieve completion within the sum already budgeted. The Wellsprings Steering Group were asked to consider an alternative name to that of Wellsprings but it was decided that the name had achieved public recognition and despite the problems to date, it was best left as existing. We look forward to this excellent sports facility opening early 2004 to provide much needed facilities for the residents of North Taunton and around.

#### Station Road

On the 29 September we had a very informative and useful joint meeting TDBC/SCC on Taunton’s Transport Strategy which was open to all Councillors and covered a whole range of initiatives to reduce congestion in Taunton. Of special significance was the proposal to carry out improvements to Station Road/Priory Bridge Road junction and from the traffic flow figures presented we certainly have a workable scheme available to us that will ease the misery of the many, many, travellers that are caught in the unacceptably long queues that presently occur. This also has to be good news for the businesses in the area that have suffered terribly because of the congestion. The detailed proposals should be presented to the Strategic Planning and Transportation Panel at their next meeting 20 November with implementation hopefully early 2004.

In addition to proposals for Station Road many other useful initiatives were discussed such as sharing of town centre surveillance information to allow monitoring of traffic, progress on Silk Mills, the Inner Relief Road, action on traffic pinch points and ensuring primary routes into and through town are prioritized for maintenance. It was accepted that

“school runs” were a problem in terms of increasing congestion but “Solomon” was not present to provide a solution! We are still working on this one.

The inner relief road, although subject to a planning application already lodged, is, I understand, the subject of further in depth consideration as to its route and its viability is under scrutiny in respect of the overall town planning exercise being carried out by Terence O’Rourke.

#### SWARMMS, A358 Dualling

It is imperative, in my view, that we achieve the dualling of the A358, this road is the most highly trafficked in Somerset with the exception of the M5 motorway. We need this road upgraded to achieve a bypass for Henlade, resolve the problems with junction 25 and provide for the economic development of Taunton. I ask for all Councillors to promote this and persuade Parish Councils and businesses that they should actively participate in lobbying the South West Regional Assembly to promote the necessity of upgrading this route. It may be thought that the upgrading of the A303 through the AONB area of the Blackdowns would be better to relieve the A358. This, in my view, is seriously flawed, the traffic using the A358 does so because it is the best route for their destination and this traffic will continue to grow, we must therefore seek to upgrade the A358 to avoid the continuing misery presently experienced by residents along the route and travellers alike.

#### The Budget Process 2004/05

The process has started and we are looking at a serious gap in available finances against the requirements even to maintain a standstill budget. We have started with one hand tied behind our back because of the huge amount stripped out of reserves to support the 2003/04 budget. I objected to this at the time but to no avail, we will now have particularly hard choices to make in order to balance our budget to make up this loss and develop services further for the people of Taunton Deane, as they have the right to expect.

To achieve this we must examine all services we presently provide and ask the following simple questions;

Do we need to continue providing this?

If no, consider ways of doing it better and more economically.

This simple process will highlight some services that we may be able to reduce, amend or simply not provide, I hope we will have the support of all Councillors, Officers and partners in our efforts to provide a balanced budget which inevitably will mean some hard choices to come.

**Councillor John Williams**  
**Leader of the Council**

