

## **COUNCIL MEETING - 20 JULY 2004**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL** **COUNCILLOR WILLIAMS - LEADER OF THE EXECUTIVE**

#### **(a) Draft Performance Plan 2004/05**

Councils are required by legislation to produce an annual Performance Plan. This year's draft Plan has been considered by the Review Board at its meeting on 9 June 2004. Much of the information and data required to produce the Plan had not been available until after the year-end 31 March. It then had to be both analysed and summarised. Additionally the recent CPA inspection had had a considerable impact on the resources available to produce the Plan. As a consequence, the Review Board were unable to approve it as the version they considered was not complete at that time.

An updated version was considered and approved by the Executive at its meeting on 23 June 2004. A copy of the Plan has been sent to all Members.

The Performance Plan will become the focus of the Council's improvement planning by articulating priorities for improvement, including how weaknesses will be addressed, opportunities exploited and better outcomes delivered for local people. It will set targets for improved future performance.

It is, therefore, RECOMMENDED that the draft Performance Plan 2004/05 be agreed and that Council be recommended to give it retrospective approval.

#### **(b) Outturn Report 2003/04**

The Executive has considered, noted and agreed the Council's General Fund and Housing Revenue Account outturn for 2003/04.

The report contained details of the major spending and income variations and there were two issues that need to come before Council.

In April 2004, it was reported that £97,000 of monies set aside for the repayment of VAT would no longer be required. The Executive had previously agreed to transfer these monies to unallocated capital resources and a Revenue Contribution to Capital Outlay had been created in 2003/04 to reflect this. However, this will require the approval of a virement by Council.

The current budget requires a total of £1,031,806 from the General Fund Reserve to support expenditure, the under spend shown in the report would now reduce this to £791,671. In order to increase the level of capital resources available, it is proposed that this underspend of £240,135 be transferred via the Revenue Account in 2004/05 to unallocated capital resources. This will require approval by Council of a Supplementary Estimate.

It is, therefore, RECOMMENDED that:

- (i) £97,000 of monies previously set aside for the repayment of VAT be vired to unallocated Capital Resources.
- (ii) A Supplementary Estimate be made in 2004/05 of an RCCO for the 2003/04 General Fund underspend of £240,135.

COUNCILLOR J R WILLIAMS

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### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR JOHN WILLIAMS – LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

The period since the last Full Council on 20 April has been very full with much happening.

We have gained Investors in People status which is a huge achievement and may I say a public thank you to all staff who worked so very, very hard to ensure we secured this.

Our new Mayor Councillor Mrs Jean Allgrove has been installed together with Deputy Mayor Councillor Richard Lees and I am sure you will all join with me in welcoming them to this, the first scheduled Full Council meeting since the installation. As usual the Mayoral duties are many and varied and it is so good to see that here in Taunton Deane we are able to maintain such a wonderful tradition which is part of our rich heritage and which is so appreciated by our electorate.

In an extremely well organised and moving ceremony the Freedom of the Borough was granted to Councillor John Meikle in recognition of his very long and valuable service to the people of Taunton Deane. This was a well deserved honour and I am delighted we were able to bestow this, the highest honour we are able. A fitting tribute in my view.

We have completed our Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspection, four inspectors visited and stayed for one week thoroughly testing our own self assessment and challenging the substance of the claims made within it. This was an extremely testing time for both officers and Members alike with the many intensive question time sessions when the detailed substantiation was sought. Despite the challenging time, morale across the Council remained high and it is a credit to all, irrespective of final outcome, that the very hard work of preparation and detailed gathering of evidence to support our claims clearly demonstrated that we are a good Council. Our external partners were also involved in the information gathering exercise when interviewed direct by the Inspectors and my sincere thanks goes to all who participated for giving of their valuable time. This may seem strange as I have no knowledge of what their answers were to the Inspectors but it would have been far worse if our partners had declined to participate! As to outcome, who can say, this will not be announced until September but I can say I came out of the process feeling more positive than negative, let us hope that my feelings are correct. I would also extend appreciation to the team of inspectors whose duty it was to challenge us, they carried out their duties in an even handed courteous manner which I believe was greatly appreciated by all. My thanks to them.

Subject to approval at this meeting we have now agreed our waste collection strategy in order to meet the stringent targets set for recycling of waste, I will not go into the detail of this but deal more with the economic aspect. Yet again we have Government imposed targets that we have to meet without any additional funding to achieve it. The capital cost of implementing the waste strategy agreed, even after central Government help, is in

excess of £600,000 which has to be found from this Council's reserves. The ongoing revenue costs will reach almost £300,000 – every single year from now on ! This item alone if fully funded from Council Tax would add over £7 to the average tax bill and this would then be decried by central Government as an unacceptable increase.

### **Consultation Document – Somerset and Exmoor National Park Structure Plan Alteration**

We have received for consultation the Deposit Draft of the Somerset and Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Alteration, 1996 to 2016, this is a very important document as it could have a huge affect on our future development proposals. Taunton Deane is recognised as having experienced the greatest rate of economic and employment growth since 1971 and this is expected to continue, clause 5.18. The Plan recognises the need for significant levels of new development but, in my opinion, does not fully address the need for improved infrastructure to accompany this development because there is no indication how this is to be achieved. The recommendation is for a huge increase in housing numbers, 10,500 net additional homes and to increase significantly the amount and variety of employment opportunities. The latter I subscribe to wholeheartedly but have great reservations about the housing numbers being promoted. As an illustration of the farcical nature of the housing numbers being imposed, in table 6.1 showing phasing, Taunton Deane is shown as completing houses at the rate of 650 per annum for the period 1996 to 2006, 6,500 houses total. We have not achieved that rate of build in recent times and in order to meet the total target would have to build at the rate of in excess of 800 houses per annum for the two years remaining of the plan period. I would say this is physically impossible to achieve as a target, yet it is being promoted.

The expectation is that the town's growth will continue beyond the plan period to 2016, (clause 3.26) with an urban extension to the North East. This in my view makes a mockery of its exhortations that developments should be well related with improved access to and within the town centre, when major development is proposed beyond Langaller towards Walford Cross to accommodate future growth. I see nothing in this plan which gives me even a glimmer of hope that the real serious traffic congestion problems presently experienced, even without the growth proposed, are being addressed. I have likened the proposed development of Taunton to being a sausage, long and thin, instead of creating a dumpling, cohesive and round! In my view the least sustainable form of development but I accept this is a draft for consultation. If we have to develop we must engage with the people of Taunton Deane to provide a much more sustainable solution than presently on offer. Clause 7.2 acknowledges that increasing level of car ownership is linked to economic growth and this growth is likely to continue, it is essential that a basket of solutions is developed to deal with this problem of which I am firmly of the opinion that an alternative route around Taunton has to be one.

Policy 45 states that bus services and facilities should be improved but regrettably this is not borne out by reality when we have recently experienced county wide bus cuts because of reduction in support by the County Council for rural bus services. The service within Taunton Deane also suffers from infrequent services, poor coverage and inconsistent

punctuality. This does not auger well as a service that will provide a decent public transport system in the future.

It also concerns me that the plan maintains a strong presumption against permanent development on the best and most versatile agricultural land (Policy 7). This could create severe difficulties for Wellington and the strong local aspiration for a relief road. I fully support in principle the preservation of good agricultural land but Wellington is virtually surrounded by good quality land so this presumption against is likely to be a major handicap. It is almost as bad as saying to Bridgwater they cannot build on the flood plain!

I welcome Policy 16, Land for Industrial, Warehouse and Business Development which states that as an authority we should ensure there is an adequate supply of land offering a range of employment sites. Taunton Deane has an acute shortage of suitable employment sites but this policy can only be implemented if the plethora of other agencies involved genuinely allow us to sensibly allocate land for employment. All of my previous comments regarding the present lack of infrastructure also apply because without improvements we will be prevented from allowing further development near strategic routes.

### **LGA Annual Conference**

During week commencing 5 July the Local Government Association Annual Conference was held in Bournemouth which I attended. It is a useful and enlightening experience to be bombarded with all manner of information in plenary sessions, breakout sessions and fringe meetings. But the most useful element is the meeting with like minded people from all different areas and organisations to share ideas and good (and bad) practice. The main themes of the conference in my view were;

New Localism

Value for money services

Small government, greater individual choice

In some respects I do believe the quest was similar to seeking the “Holy Grail” in that central government are seeking to devolve powers but not really looking to democratically elected and accountable local authorities to take on the responsibilities they are seeking to devolve. Alternative organisations were being sought such as the many unelected organisations (quangos) that could receive and administer the resources and policies being devolved. I believe it fair to say that a resounding message was given by delegates that central government had available to them the tremendous resources of local government. They had the established procedures to maintain probity and accountability, they should be trusted, not sidelined for unelected and democratically unaccountable bodies.

The message was clear in my view, we do not require “new localism” we already have existing local government therefore ease the shackles and allow us to govern.

Equally delegates were direct in their response to government protestations that local government had seen a net increase in funding of 30% since 1997. Speakers were quickly and forcibly reminded of all the government inspired initiatives that had been thrust upon local government without any funding to finance it.

As would be expected the means of funding local government was a hot topic during the whole conference and although a “review of funding” is expected to be published shortly, strong indications were given that the major element of local government collected taxation would remain as a property based tax. It is, after all, simple to administrate, does not move, is economical to collect and achieves the highest collection rate of all taxes imposed, it appears common sense will prevail. This is not to say that the view as strongly articulated at the conference is that the level of Council Tax as now imposed is unsustainable. It is a great burden to those on fixed incomes experiencing the dramatic increases that have occurred since 1997. The way central government has imposed duties on local government without providing funds has been a stealth tax by reducing support which forces up local taxes if services are to be maintained. The message was sent that we need sensible funding policies, not the short termism of challenge funding or bidding which is so prevalent now, we can only wait and see if it was heard.

Above all there was a plea to allow us to just get on with the job and run our council’s in a manner best for the area we were in, remove the command and control regime that has now become all pervasive and allow us to do what we are good at, provide good local services that people tell us they want. This will go against the governments idea of uniformity of services for all areas but we are far better placed to provide services that are wanted rather than dictated from Whitehall. This would also, of course, involve the removal of the many layers of inspection and monitoring that have built up over the years, I am pleased to say even James Strachan, Chairman of the Audit Commission, said “it is time central government let go, let local authorities get on with what they know best”. We have, in my view, the ultimate check which is an annual audit of our affairs by the Audit Commission. This should be sufficient to establish our performance when measured against other authorities thus releasing us from the huge drain on our resources as caused by the plethora of checks and inspections now required.

### **Taunton Regeneration (Vision for Taunton)**

I cannot allow this opportunity to pass without an update on progress which I have to say, for various reasons outside of our control, has been disappointing because the anticipated reports on infrastructure, feasibility and viability have only just become available. These were due some months ago but because of the sheer scale of the development as proposed have taken longer to prepare than envisaged. In addition there are the complications of assessing if the inner relief road is right for Taunton with the development as presently proposed. The viability studies will be presented to us shortly but the final infrastructure report will not be available until September at the earliest.

However, much work has been continuing within our own organisation to ensure that the correct building blocks are in place to allow development to proceed once we have assessed the vital reports that are now available but to be assessed. For instance the work towards relocating the livestock market for which a planning application has now been received for its proposed site at Chelston, Wellington, which is an essential precursor to freeing up the site at Firepool. Substantial work has also been carried out on mapping all of our landholdings, which are substantial, within Taunton Deane and particularly within the regeneration area, to ensure we are fully appraised of any conditions or covenants that may prevent redevelopment as proposed. A vital part of the preparation work.

Discussion has been ongoing with the Somerset County Cricket Club and how we may assist with their aspiration to achieve hosting of international matches which is essential to their long term economic viability. The Taunton Vision document refers to the Cricket Club as being the “jewel in Taunton’s crown” we must, in my view, do all possible to ensure that the jewel remains within our midst. Coupled with this is the need to review our leisure facilities that could be affected and the primary one is the Brewhouse Theatre which has to be maintained as the pre-eminent producer of culture and theatrical productions for Taunton Deane.

### **Leisure Trust**

This is before you tonight with proposals that have been fully discussed at Scrutiny and Executive and I thank officers and Members for the tremendous amount of work and commitment given to develop the proposals as before you for approval. I commend these to you as being the sensible way forward to ensure that we continue to deliver first rate leisure facilities at an affordable price to the taxpayer of Taunton Deane.

### **Housing Stock Options**

This is before us tonight for consideration as to the way forward. I would stress, as I am sure Councillor Garner will reiterate, we are only asking for a decision tonight to consult with our tenants. The case has been adequately made to all, by our independent consultants, that “do nothing” is not an option, to remain as we are would almost inevitably result in a severe degradation of our present generally high quality service to our tenants. It is therefore imperative that we allow our tenants the opportunity to choose, that is all we are seeking tonight. It can only be regarded as unfortunate that some Members could not see their way clear to support the recommendation previously as in essence all they are doing, if they were to be successful, is denying the tenants the right to determine their own destiny, the right to choose. Prevarication, if continued, could cause uncertainty when it comes to voting and if this resulted in a vote against the recommendation of the Tenants Forum and this Council it would be at great cost. In the order of £500,000 would have to be found from Council (taxpayers) funds to cover the cost of the failed exercise which in turn would divert much needed funds from our efforts to improve our social housing. I would ask that careful thought be given as to voting

intentions and reasons why, with the serious consequences that will result that lack of support will cause.

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