

COUNCIL MEETING – 16 DECEMBER 2003

RECOMMENDATION TO COUNCIL COUNCILLOR WILLIAMS – LEADER OF THE EXECUTIVE

1 Old Market Shoppers Car Park – Anti-Suicide Measures

Since its erection in the early 1970's there have been a number of tragic occurrences at this car park. There have been **four** this year, with two occurring within a four week period **during the summer**. At a recent Inquest the Coroner recommended that the Council should take action to reduce the opportunities for suicide to take place.

The history of events has been subject to public comment and discussion. Taking this into account, and also the number of attempts that have been successfully averted by the actions of our Parking Services staff, I have come to the conclusion, in the full knowledge that there is no legal obligation on the Council to do anything, that it is important that works are undertaken as soon as possible to prevent people being able to jump from any of the parking decks.

Officers are investigating proposals and a planning application has been submitted. A Project Appraisal Report has been prepared for consideration during the budgetary process but **I feel** that due to the urgency of the work formal approval from Council should be sought before the next budget is set.

It is therefore RECOMMENDED that Council approves the principle of the capital scheme to provide anti-suicide fencing to this car park and approves the necessary supplementary estimate of £100,000 from unallocated capital funds. This would leave the unallocated capital funds at £1,964,356.

Councillor J R Williams

COUNCIL MEETING 16 DECEMBER 2003

REPORT OF COUNCILLOR WILLIAMS - LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

In my last report to Full Council I commented on the many initiatives being carried forward by your Council and these are still ongoing with a major commitment of our resources into their promotion and organisation. These are the Vision for Taunton proposals, Urban Extension study, response to the Local Plan Inspectors report, relocation of the livestock market, proposals for redeveloping High Street/Crescent car park area, completion of the Wellsprings Sports Centre. Also, measures to ease traffic congestion and promote alternative means of travel, housing stock transfer, setting up of the Leisure Trust, implementing the Licensing Act and not least the budget setting process.

In Wellington we continue to be committed to improvements in the Cornhill, preservation of the important listed Tonedale buildings and its machinery. We are also intent on replacement of the dilapidated and vandalised North Street public toilets subject to funding being available.

Something that we must also try and address is the much underutilised asset of the Old Municipal Buildings, it is a wonderful public building in an excellent town centre position. We must try and find alternative uses that will bring a return instead of being a drain on the public purse as at present. This almost certainly will need investment and lateral thinking to achieve something in keeping with the grand building it is and provides a useful return.

I provide below a more detailed review of some of the above.

Terence O'Rourke Planning

At last we have been able to present to the people of Taunton Deane proposals as to how Taunton could look and develop over the next 20/25 years and I must say I consider these to be very exciting. The launch of the plans took place at the Brewhouse in mid-November with our partners the SWRDA and SCC, since then we have extended the exhibition to the library and the Deane House reception area. Finally it will be prominently displayed from the 15 to 18 December by "The Toads" in the Old Market Centre. My personal thanks to the management of the Old Market Centre for making this excellent venue available to us at such a busy time.

The feedback that we are generally receiving is heartening in that it is positive and people like what they see. There is obvious scepticism about the deliverability of such major regeneration plans and that the development will proceed without major infrastructure improvements to our roads and public services. This doubt in peoples minds is perfectly understandable when it is considered against the years of deprivation suffered through

lack of investment in our infrastructure over the preceding years. I have no illusions as to the difficulties ahead in bringing together the many parts of the jigsaw to ensure that we all benefit from the major regeneration and redevelopment proposals as planned.

At present the Treasury Department have appointed Sir Michael Lyons to carry out a wide ranging review to relocate circa 20,000 civil servants from Ministries located in and around central London to the provinces. Can I assure you that Taunton is bidding hard to become one of the towns to be considered for a share in this relocation project. Our proposed redevelopment at Firepool is regarded as eminently suitable and meeting all the criteria of the review such as, urban regeneration, adjacent a main line station, excellent services and schools and plans for being a major regional centre. All this besides an excellent environment to attract people away from London.

Station Road

I am delighted to report that our meetings with the County Council were successful and that plans are now in hand to commence alteration works the third week in January 04.

This was made possible by holding a specially convened Strategic Planning and Transportation Review Panel followed by an Executive meeting early November, in order that approval could be given to County and the necessary orders placed for work to commence in the New Year. The fact this was brought about so quickly reaffirms this administrations commitment to getting things done.

Although there are some detractors about the fact that it is only Priory Bridge Road returning to two lanes at present, I would answer this criticism by saying we achieved the greatest improvement possible in the shortest possible time. Had we held out for both Priory Bridge and Station Road to be returned to two lanes there is considerable doubt if we would have achieved any alterations by January 2005!!

The Highways Authority did model the traffic flows and assure us that there proposed improvements will reduce congestion substantially with only Priory Bridge Road returned to two lanes, with little extra benefit from Station Road returning to two lanes. It was clearly stated by us that should the planned improvements not happen then we would be revisiting the proposals and seek alterations to Station Road as well.

Relocation of Livestock Market

We are still very much committed to facilitating the relocation of the livestock market to adjacent junction 26 as are Taunton Market Auctioneers, in fact, I am anticipating a planning application to be submitted in this respect very shortly.

A considerable amount has been printed in the press recently suggesting that J24 was the favoured place and that it was backed by the Regional Development Agency who are our partners in the Taunton Regeneration project. This I am pleased to report is no more than the dissemination of rumour and misinformation presumably to try and strengthen the

case of supporters of J24. They must be concerned that J26 is the most likely future location of a new livestock market.

To clear up confusion, the RDA in a statement issued on 20 November about Taunton Livestock Market, clearly stated "The relocation of the market to an alternative suitable site is important as the current location is a key area in the proposals for the regeneration of Taunton as part of the Taunton Vision. However where it is finally located is a matter for the operators and Councils involved."

This belies any suggestion that the RDA are specifically supporting J24 as the proposed relocation site, as has been suggested.

Taunton Livestock Market, and it will retain this name even at J26, is among the top three best performing markets in the country and I would certainly not wish to see it located outside of Taunton Deane. We have benefited tremendously from the foresight of previous generations in as much that we have Castle Green, a former market site, and the existing market site in Council ownership which are extremely valuable assets. This will assist our present regeneration project and our investment in the new site should be continued for the benefit of generations yet to come.

Wellsprings Sports Centre

It is extremely pleasing to report that we are now on schedule for handover before Christmas and a meeting to receive the keys of the building is scheduled for 22 December. Time will then be spent on training and final preparations in readiness to receive the general public as visitors to view the centre on 3 and 4 January 2004, in readiness for the first customers on 5 January.

I made an informal visit to the centre with Cllrs Mrs Bradley, David Gill and James Curry was showing us around. I was very impressed with the space and fitting out of the facilities, it will be a wonderful addition to the leisure facilities for Taunton, particularly the people of North Taunton. The hall is extremely impressive and I would think is one of the largest indoor spaces available in Taunton Deane, finished to the highest standards with excellent acoustics. Besides being a superb sports hall it will provide an excellent venue for concerts, exhibitions and shows and I am sure, be of great benefit to Taunton Deane.

An official opening ceremony is being planned and the date is yet to be announced but likely to be February or March.

Budget Setting 2004/05

The initial position showing a circa £670,000 budget gap has already been reported to the Review Board for consideration. Much work is being carried out as to how we can either increase income or reduce costs in order to bridge this gap but it is early days and our deliberations have not reached the stage where they are conclusive. It is not helped in any

way by the fact that we have received preliminary advice of our Revenue Support Grant from the ODPM but this is approximately £700k short of our anticipated amount which I understand is to be topped up by the DWP (Department of Works & Pensions). At the time of writing this I am not aware of the amount we will be receiving, the fears are that it will be substantially less than the £700K anticipated in which case it will seriously exacerbate our already difficult budget position. Notwithstanding all this, we are well aware of the resentment caused by excessive Council Tax increases and will be doing all possible to minimise this.

However, it is apparent our situation has not changed from my report to the last meeting that the budget setting will be extremely difficult and we have some hard choices ahead of us.

SWARMMS, A358 Dualling

I could not present a report without exhorting you all to strongly support the dualling of the A358, I am aware that amongst a few there is some sympathy towards dualling of the A303 in preference but I have to say this would be the worst of all options for Taunton in my view. It would not draw any significant amounts of traffic away from the A358 and it would remain the heaviest trafficked road in Somerset, after the M5, it is at present carrying twice its daily design capacity. Any possibility of the Henlade bypass being constructed and improvements, or an alternative, to J25 of the M5 will be set back years.

I would ask that we present a united front and not be deceived by the siren voices that try to persuade that improvements to the A303 will provide far more benefits than improvements to the A358. If you have not already seen a paper issued by English Nature do let me know, this sets out far more explicitly than I can the environmental case as to why the A358 must take precedence over the A303. I will arrange to forward a copy if of interest.

Councillor John Williams
Leader of the Council