

Part II Reports from the Executive

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Williams, Leader of the Council

We have recently received the presentation from the Audit Commission of our Annual Audit and Inspection Letter, all Group Leaders and Executive Members were invited to this presentation. The performance of Taunton Deane Borough Council is impressive indeed and I am hugely proud, justifiably so in my view, of the immense team effort by all Officers, staff and Members in order to achieve the clear accolades given in this report. To set the scene I only need reproduce the first two paragraphs of the Key Messages as follows:-

- 1) The Council delivers high quality services and is increasing its corporate ability to improve. It has good strategic financial management and delivers positive value for money for local tax payers and citizens. The Council is forward thinking and is showing innovation in planning for the future. Few weaknesses exist although the Council recognises the need for better understanding of impacts of its investment and improved workforce planning.
- 2) The Council continues to improve and delivers high quality services that are valued by local people. In 2004/05, 65 per cent of performance indicators matched the top 50 per cent of councils nationally, including 41 per cent in the best 25 per cent. Councillors and senior managers are driving a much clearer vision for continuous improvement for the whole of the district. Corporate capacity has improved and value for money and prioritisation are strong. Weaknesses remain in measuring the impact of investment in some areas such as economic investment and scrutiny remains largely ineffective.

I abstract from this

“Councillors and senior managers are driving a much clearer vision for continuous improvement across the whole of the district.”

So much for the detractors that continually offer negative criticism by saying that only Taunton matters. We have consistently said we are a Council for the whole of the Deane and this resoundingly supports and corroborates that message.

The praise heaped upon our Council by this Annual audit Report is both generous and fulsome, I applaud and congratulate all who have worked so hard across the organisation to achieve what is an excellent report and maintains our “Excellent” status as a Council. This is indeed a team effort for which I thank all.

Can I also pay tribute to all Members of the Executive who have worked tirelessly as part of the team to bring about this clear vision and continuous improvement, I am well aware of the commitment and sacrifice that has to be made to keep up and drive forward all that is happening.

Livestock Market Relocation

At the last Full Council we received criticism that the Livestock Market relocation had not been mentioned and lo and behold shortly after that, negative and destructive criticism was contained in some local papers attributed to senior Members of this Council who should know better. This was picked up in further reports in the press during the subsequent week with the addition that the SWRDA had recommended Bridgwater as a preferred location and that Taunton Deane were being secretive. SWRDA have not recommended Bridgwater as a location, confining themselves to one large market in the area and market forces would determine final outcome. As for secrecy on our side I have reported to successive meetings that ultimately market forces will prevail and the whole situation regarding the possible relocation of the Livestock market was discussed at a Vision Steering Group meeting, 29 November 05, with full cross party representation. The results were subsequently reported to the Executive and recorded in Minutes of the meeting, 7 December 05, and on to Full Council, 13 December. This clearly set out the position at that time which was that we agreed to invest in principle but the amount was subject to provision of a business plan by TMA to allow determination of the amount to be invested. This is not a case of "too little too late" but more of ensuring we are in possession of full facts before any decision can be made. TMA have still not provided us with the necessary information to progress this further and the ball is firmly in their court. To suggest we are being dilatory or secretive is regrettable and extremely disappointing that it came from senior Members that do, or should, know the full facts but choose to offer yet more negative criticism that does not help towards the economic regeneration of Wellington and undermines the morale of those involved.

Ballot for Housing Stock Transfer

There is a complete lack of understanding or acceptance amongst some of why this is being considered. What we have to do much more is to convey the message of why it is necessary and that we must go this route unless the taxpayers in the community as a whole, wish to bear the incredible cost of achieving "decent homes standard" from raised Council Tax as the housing capital programme cannot finance this cost.

Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Savills and Aldbourne Associates have all independently advised the Council and Tenants that to achieve the "decent homes standard" by 2010, as prescribed by central Government, will cost the Council Taxpayer in the order of £2m more per year than the resources available from now to 2010 because of the state of our housing stock as assessed by

Savills. That money, which would total in the order of £6 to £8 million, is capital, and cannot be afforded within our Housing Capital Programme. This leaves the burden to be met using capital resources currently earmarked for other Council priorities. We need to be getting that message out there and asking the promoters of the “status quo” where is the money coming from? Also, are they going to be honest and say to tenants the “decent homes standard”, which is all the Council can afford to achieve, is far less than the “Taunton Deane” standard, tenants are used to. These facts have been conclusively demonstrated by information made available to both administration and members alike.

As the administration responsible, we are promoting a transfer to a newly formed RSL because it avoids these financial problems. The new RSL can keep all the rent collected, rather than having to pay some of the money over to the Government as the Council presently has to do. They will have access to the money markets to borrow the finances required to improve homes and services. The transfer of homes will also provide TDBC with a capital sum which can be reinvested in one of our top priorities, social/affordable housing.

To anybody who does not believe this to be a factual position, determined by professionals, please let them come forward and advise how they will afford to meet the “decent homes standard”

This also places into perspective the cost of the consultation and ballot procedure which presently has increased to £810k. Although substantial it is a relatively small sum compared to the amount at risk for the Council Tax payer of Taunton Deane of £6m to £8M.

The irony of the whole bizarre situation of the opposition’s ducking and weaving, is that it is the tenants who make the final decision in respect of a transfer, not the Conservative administration or the Government. Regrettably, what the opposition are saying is that tenants should be denied full information before they make a choice, not a very “democratic” policy! It can only be considered an abdication of their responsibility, to seek to deny the tenants full information to prevent them making an informed choice.

I would also take issue with the opposition to the scheme when they use deceitful tactics to frighten tenants by saying the housing will be sold to an outside agency. They are well aware, if transferred, it will be our existing staff who will establish and continue to operate the housing services. The Board who will be responsible for running the organisation will be made up of tenants, councillors and independent members, who live or work in the area and so have a local connection. By having tenants on the Board, this will bring them into the very heart of the decision-making process of the new organisation and so enable them to shape and improve services for the benefit of all tenants.

Affordable Housing

Following the recent ARK Consultancy report reassessing our affordable housing needs in Taunton Deane, it has highlighted a serious deficiency in our provision of social rented and affordable to buy housing. We have an assessed need in Taunton Deane of 256 per annum social rented and 308 affordable homes to meet the need. Previously we have been working to the David Couttie report which reported a need of 131 dwellings per annum from 2002 when prepared. Regrettably, as an authority, we have not achieved this figure, in fact, we have failed miserably to provide the necessary housing required. The assessed need of 131 dwellings per annum now rises to 564 dwellings per annum, this is not possible to achieve if we have to rely on our usual methods of supply through section 106 agreements with developers. As an authority therefore we do need to adopt a much more proactive approach to overcome the serious problem facing our community. This will require us to adopt a constructive and mature approach to proposals that were previously unthinkable. Without cooperation across the Council we will be failing our community as it will not be possible to achieve the currently assessed numbers by accepted conventional means.

Tone Leisure

Congratulations to Juliette Dickinson and Team of Tone Leisure in becoming the preferred bidder to win the contract from South Hams District Council for management of their leisure facilities. I know a huge amount of work went into this bid from a very committed team, I am delighted that all their hard work paid off and I am sure that both South Hams and ourselves will benefit from the economies of scale that are bound to flow from this successful bid. I wish them every success for the future.

Hamilton Park Allotments

I was recently invited to visit the allotments by Mr Bowditch, Chairman of the Association there. The incredible commitment shown by the organisers of the Allotment Associations to ensure the allotments are kept and maintained in such a wonderful manner never fails to impress me. It was a crisp refreshing sunny morning when I visited and it was amazing how tranquil and relaxing it was in these havens, gardens created in the midst of traffic and houses yet so peaceful. It is a great credit to Mr Bowditch and all other allotment holders that work so hard to create this oasis in the midst of developed areas.

Charging for Open Spaces

How strange it is, I have not heard anybody object to the principle of this Council applying charges to commercial organisations for the use of its open spaces yet the Flower Show organisers take it as an affront that they should contribute a relatively small percentage of the full charge for the use of Vivary Park. Much is spoken about threatening the viability of the show and despite public statements

by myself that if this is the case and it can be proven, we will review the charges. The organisers and some Members of this Council still appear determined to berate us. I can understand that the organisers have no duty of care towards the many, many, taxpayers who do not necessarily benefit from the show but help fund the upkeep of the park, but our own Members are showing a disregard for those same taxpayers. The charges as applied are in my view equitable and fair to the organisers of the show and to the much wider Council Tax paying public where as an elected representative of the District Council I consider my primary responsibility lies. It is also often claimed that we should not charge the show because of the wider benefit for businesses in Taunton. I therefore applaud the fact that Hatchers have stepped in and provided funding for the Flower Show obviously recognising the benefits gained. Congratulations to Hatchers for this bold initiative and I sincerely hope the benefit of the show is recognised by other businesses so that it is supported in future years in similar manner. This in my opinion will be true recognition of the value of the show to local business by providing financial support for the benefit they gain from what I have always stated is a premier show of the South West.

Cllr John Williams
Leader Taunton Deane Borough Council

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Mrs Joanna Lewin-Harris – Community Leadership

SCC POLICY COMMISSION

The cross cutting theme of the Local Area Agreement is Stronger Communities. The aims under this theme include “a more thriving and vibrant Voluntary and Community (VCS) in Somerset which is in a stronger position to represent and support our communities”. To deliver this aim, the LAA has targets to increase the proportion of key public services delivered by the VCS, to reduce the number of VCS organisations that are reliant on grant-funding and to increase the number of social enterprises.

Somerset County Council has set up a Policy Commission to help to decide how best to achieve these targets. I attended the first meeting of this commission early in April. The Commission is a task and finish group that will review the impact of local public policy on the VCS in Somerset and consider its role in public sector delivery. Specifically it will look at the total funding pot currently available to the VCS and ask whether this money can be used more effectively. Further it will look at ways in which the VCS in Somerset may be better able to draw in outside funding.

The Policy Commission is required to work within a tight timetable and is tasked with finishing its work by mid-July with a report in the autumn.

The first meeting focused on the thinking behind setting up the policy commission and how to proceed. Next steps include mapping the coverage, funding, number of volunteers and current service delivery of the VCS in Somerset and a consultation with the VCS to find out their priorities. Both these are considerable tasks.

CLEAN SWEEP

TDBC joined the police in a Clean Sweep day on March 16th. This focused on a major clean up in various areas and also involved community groups. Dog fouling, graffiti and litter were high on the agenda as were untaxed cars. Halcon Church, the Norton Fitzwarren Local Action Team, the House of St Martin and the Quantock Rangers were all involved in litter picking and general tidying up. The DLO was active in the Halcon and Roman Road area, with new planting and collecting rubbish. ASDA trolleys were collected from round the area and trading standards worked with our licensing department to carry out under age drinking checks. Deputy Chief Constable Steve Otter joined Cllr Williams in painting out graffiti and there were extra patrols to target anti-social behaviour from 6 pm onwards in Galmington and Halcon.

This was a successful initiative and I hope we use the experience gained to repeat the Clean Sweep on a regular basis.

CCTV

I am very pleased that we have now agreed to enter into an agreement for CCTV monitoring with Sedgemoor District Council for a period of 5 years. This will give us a considerably enhanced service of 24/7 active monitoring by dedicated CCTV operators and fulfils one of our key priorities in tackling anti-social behaviour and fear of crime. The police are very much in support of this change, and a visit to the Sedgemoor control centre has done a lot to reassure members of Taunton Retailers Against Crime, Pub Watch and our own parking attendants that their requirements will be met.

I am confident that this is going to result in a much improved service but the decision is not irreversible and our own facilities will be “mothballed” for the time being.

This is another example of this council’s willingness to enter into partnership with other authorities to deliver a better and more cost effective service to the public.

TAKING A STAND AWARD

Home Office “Taking a Stand” Awards have now been running for three years and are open to anyone who has taken action in their community to tackle anti-social behaviour. The awards are about recognising the commitment, energy and courage of people who have made a difference in their communities.

I was keen to promote the work of our Local Action Teams and nominated Claudine Wall, the founder of the Lambrook LAT, for this award. Lambrook LAT was one of the first in Taunton Deane and has, among other things, organised a graffiti project and football goals for young people. This has led to better relations between young people and other local residents.

The Home Office has just informed me that Claudine Wall and the Lambrook LAT have won a Taking a Stand Award and will shortly be receiving their prize of £1000. This is great news and I heartily congratulate Claudine and Lambrook LAT.

LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The advent of Local Area Agreements, the recent Government Consultation on the future of LSP’s and the need to develop a new sustainable community strategy for Taunton Deane all point to the need for Taunton Deane’s LSP to look again at its role and function.

The LSP has therefore commission Solace to look at:

- The purpose of the LSP (or should there even be one?)
- The membership – who should be on it?
- How should it be supported?
- Does it, or should it, act as the partnership of partnerships in the borough?
- How should we approach community planning in the future?
- Governance arrangements

The review will include interviews with members of the LSP and a range of other relevant stakeholders and is expected to conclude in May 2006.

WAY AHEAD CONFERENCE

As a member of the Regional Assembly, I recently attended the Way Ahead conference at Bristol University. This conference, organised by SWRA and the RDA, focused on the challenge of delivering sustainable communities and preserving the South West's environmental capital while the population increases and the economy grows.

The conference, which was addressed by some notable speakers (John Prescott, Professor Steve Smith the Vice Chancellor of Exeter University, Tim Smit of the Eden Project, Baroness Brenda Dean, Candy Atherton of the Housing Corporation to name just a few), was very well attended and very worthwhile.

The challenges faced by the South West were flagged up: inadequate infrastructure, traffic growth, water shortages in some areas, low skills, the high cost of housing, climate change.

The suggested solutions are around: creating energy efficient high density urban living space where people choose to live, sustainable construction including energy and water conservation, improving skills with a focus on secondary schools, increasing the supply of renewable energy, reducing traffic growth, better public transport and more affordable housing. The importance of partnership working to achieve the aims was continually stressed.

The day was very stimulating and thought provoking. It is worth noting, however, that while Bristol, Exeter and Cornwall got several mentions, I don't think that Somerset was mentioned once and certainly not Taunton. Somehow we have got to raise our game.

VISIT TO BRUSSELS

I also went to Brussels with a group from Somerset County Council for a couple of days in early April, last week, courtesy of Neil Parish MEP. Among other visits, we went to the South West UK Brussels Office. This office is funded by various partners in the South West, including local authorities, to enhance the South West's presence in Europe and to be the link between the local authorities in the SW and the EU. It was disappointing to find that the Director, Eleni Marianou, had never heard of the Vision for Taunton. This may well mean that we are missing out on funding opportunities. WE need to raise our game here too.

Councillor Joanna Lewin-Harris

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Bishop . Planning Policy and Transportation

Regional Spatial Strategy

The Full Assembly met on 10th March ,2006 and signed off the final Draft RSS for submission to the Secretary of State and formal public consultation will take place. Government will appoint an independent panel to consider the consultation response and undertake the Examination in Public (EIP)

The panel will make recommendations to Government in a report, which will be used to prepare and propose changes to the Draft RSS which will be subject to a further round of consultation, and will be tested against sustainable objectives before the final RSS is issued by the Secretary of State. The process will take up to two years, after which the RSS will become a Statutory Document.

The draft document, in Section 6, proposes significant changes to the delivery of housing in the region and particularly in Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCTs) – Taunton is proposed as an SSCTs with an Overall Average Net Dwelling Requirement from 2006 to 2026 of 865 dwellings per annum. For the period 2006 to 2016 the net Annual Dwelling Requirement is 825 p.a. and this rises to 905 dwellings p.a. from 2016 to 2026.. Within these proposed figures provision will need to be made for at least 30% of all housing development annually to be Affordable with the ability to specify up to 60% or higher in areas of greatest need, where this can be demonstrated over a sustained period. The draft document points out that LA,s need to be realistic in their expectations of Affordable Housing, recognising the danger of stifling overall Housing growth through over ambitious requirements.

During the LDD process it will be necessary to identify an appropriate division of Affordable Housing between housing for rent, intermediate tenures (including forms of shared ownership).

Another change in the delivery of housing in the urban area of Taunton and in any planned urban extensions requires that the density of housing development in the Taunton SSCT should be at least 50 Dwellings per hectare and considerably higher in well planned mixed use developments within the existing urban area. It will be interesting to see the changing forms of development that will be necessary to achieve these figures and I am sure that some members will find it impossible to believe that it can be achieved!! The draft strategy also states that LA.s will need to regularly monitor factors relating to the size, mix and quality of housing such as indicators of habitable rooms per hectare..

Launch of the Great Western Franchise

On 3rd April an event was launched , to mark the occasion at Temple Meads Station, Bristol, where a special train, displaying the new exterior livery for the fleet arrived. Following the event at Temple Meads the special train continued

its tour of the region bound for Plymouth and calling at Weston Super Mare and Taunton where it was welcomed by Councillor C. Bakewell. Local Authorities and others have given their response to the proposed First Great Western rail timetable and we have been assured that serious consideration is being given to all the comments received. The new franchise combines the networks previously operated by First Great Western, First Great Western Link and Wessex Trains. I gather that talks are now progressing with the West Somerset Railway to endeavour to achieve a link.

Netherclay Community Woodland, Bishops Hull

The area was dedicated a Local Nature Reserve in June 2004 after the trees had been planted, on this 4.39 hectares of land owned by TDDBC, by a contractor appointed by the Council who is responsible for maintaining the trees for a further year. This winter the Council decided to lay the existing roadside hedge and appointed a contractor to train the DLO staff to do the work, and a visit to the site will prove that the work has been well done. At the invitation of the Somerset Wildlife Trust I visited the site, together with Members of Bishops Hull Parish Council, at the end of March when a cheque was presented to the Trust for £60000 by Virridor Credits to enable the Trust to purchase an additional 13 acres. Planting will begin later this year and Virridor is donating a further £40000 towards trees, fencing and other works at the growing nature reserve. Bishops Hull Parish Council has also provided £10000 for the project. Extending Netherclay will improve the contribution that the woodland will make to the quality of life for local people and will also add to its wildlife potential. The increase in tree and shrub cover will also help to slow the rate of local rainwater run off, helping to reduce the risk of flooding further downstream within the basin of the River Tone. I hope that members will visit the site to see for themselves what has been done.

Planning Delivery Grant

We have been notified that we are due to receive £265030 planning delivery grant this year calculated on the basis of our performance in Development Control, E-govt and Plan Making. The government will consult later in the year on how councils that meet housing targets can receive larger cash payouts. Communities minister David Milliband said the government would be consulting on reforms to the planning delivery grant to ensure that it better supports areas delivering high numbers of new homes.

On street parking meters.

Seven additional parking meters have been ordered and are due to be delivered by 29th April, and should be installed during the early part of May.

Extracts from recent Planning Appeals

Two appeals have been allowed in respect of affordable housing in a LA area in which a housing needs survey in 2002 identified a need for an additional 261 affordable homes a year but the council had only delivered eight in 2004-05. Apparently no sites had been allocated in the area as suitable for affordable housing. Although both sites would have some impact on the character of the countryside, the inspector decided that the need to provide more affordable housing was a compelling reason in favour of allowing the appeals.

A scheme for housing, of modern design, in a conservation area was approved by an inspector who considered that the design of the scheme was distinctly contemporary. However given the mixture of styles, and ages of the buildings in the conservation area the inspector agreed that the scheme would preserve the conservation area's character.

In dealing with an application for costs on behalf of the applicant the Inspector noted that the application had been recommended for approval by a planning officer but at the meeting a member of the committee is alleged to have stated that the council did not do modern, inferring that only a traditional design was acceptable.

It appears that the reference to the buildings design in the council's reason for refusal was a reference to the scheme's contemporary nature.

The Inspector also stated that in his opinion it was insufficient for planning officers to produce reasons of their own after the event and then ascribe them to the planning committee.

As not enough evidence had been produced to support the criticism of the design a full award of the appellant's costs was awarded.

A planning inspector allowed an appeal, and granted costs to the appellants after ruling that a condition imposed on a permission for a housing scheme was unnecessarily restrictive because it sought to impose minimum distances between habitable room windows.

The inspector took into account the fact that the council in refusing permission contrary to the advice of its planning officer, had failed to substantiate its concerns, causing the appellants to incur unnecessary expense.

Plans for affordable cottages on a rural exceptions site were allowed as the inspector ruled that it would not be detrimental to the areas character and appearance or materially conflict with normal policies of constraint. It was also considered that it was illogical for the council to designate a village boundary within which development would be acceptable but then to claim that development outside the boundary could not be developed because of the limited facilities available in the village.

Councillor Cliff Bishop

COUNCIL MEETING - 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Mrs Bradley – Leisure, Arts and Culture

COMMUNITY ARTS AND ARTS DEVELOPMENT

Over 10,000 people attended the Anne Frank exhibition, the launch and the awareness evenings at Temple Methodist Church in March. The bookstall took over £7,500 and donations to the Anne Frank trust amounted to £2,500. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with many asking what happens next....

In the immediate future, The Somerset County Council is producing material on CD Rom which draws on the Exhibition and the associated events. Copies of this will go to all schools in Somerset as resource material and the SAFE Steering Group produce a report to our sponsors. Many thanks are due to David Clitheroe, chair of the steering group, and the many others who worked so hard to make this exhibition happen.

The Taunton Cultural Consortium met on 4 April with a presentation from the Brewhouse on their plans for expansion. The Taunton Castle project is proceeding well on the basis of funding of £4.75 m from HLF and the balance of the £6.33 m total from other sources. The appointment of consultants for the works was expected early in May. From 24 April the Service will be running a series of reports in the *Gazette* on the plans as part of its public consultations. Richard Gould, chief executive of the Somerset County Cricket Ground, has been voted on to the Executive group of Taunton Cultural Consortium.

PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES

Green Flag Awards

Three applications have been submitted for this important national award this year and the outcome will be known in July.

Vivary Park:

The annual programme of free Sunday afternoon bandstand concerts in the park commences on June 11 and continues until September 3.

Ideas for improvements to Wilton Lands and the rear of Vivary Park will be widely publicised during the summer to identify priorities and ideas for improvements to some of the older facilities in these areas.

Victoria Park:

The new children's play area and Multi Use Games Area were officially open on March 25th by his worship the Mayor of Taunton Deane, also a ward Member for the local area. The event was very well attended by children and young people using the play ground and joining in the coaching sessions for basketball and football. All the family had a go at the circus skills workshops and the Victoria Park Action Group provided teas and cakes.

The morning also included the planting of ten oak trees to commemorate the visit to Taunton of the Anne Frank Exhibition sponsored by the Anne Frank Trust and

Clark Wilmott. My thanks go especially to our Officer Debbie Arscott who was responsible for setting up the event.

Since that time numerous people have commented on the large numbers of young people using the facilities in particular the ball games area which has proved to be a huge success. Over the coming months plans for the proposed wildlife area and community garden in the park will be developed .

Taunton Green:

“Barclays Spaces For Sports” have confirmed £50,000 of grant aid for the conversion to a Multi Use Games Area of one of the 4 tennis courts at Taunton Green. Work is expected to start in late April or early May to provide a valuable resource for young people in the North Taunton area. A further £20,000 has been secured for coaching on the site over the next 3 years.

Wellington Open Spaces

Wellington Town Council has set up a working group of Councillors to help agree priorities for improving the towns open spaces. A comprehensive report commissioned by Taunton Deane, sets out the value and quality of each open space and will provide a starting point for the group’s work in consulting local communities.

Play Strategy

The Big Lottery has allocated this Council £208,000 for developing childrens’ play services and facilities. This sum is subject to an approved partnerships strategy for children’s play services in the Borough covering the whole spectrum of play environments from the street corner to supervised play areas. The age range is 0 to 18 years and the definition of play is very wide. This Council will be facilitating the development of the Strategy over the coming months.

SPORTS

The Sports Strategy

Work is continuing with the aim of completing a sports strategy for Taunton Deane by May 2006. Consultation has taken place with Councillors, partners and stakeholders. Now an issues paper summarising matter arising from this will be ‘tested’ with many of those original consultees to ensure that partners remain committed to the project at every stage.

Beech Grove Playing Field

A pre contract meeting is arranged for mid April before work starts on a drainage system to the Beech Grove Playing Field in Wellington. The County Council owns the field but proposes to lease it to this Council and we will sub-lease it to the adjacent Wellington Rugby Club to become a second XV rugby field.

The Rugby pitch on the Wellington Playing Field currently used by the club will be designated a football pitch. Funding comes from Developer Contributions.

Gatchell House Developer Contributions

We are investigating the possibility of using the £80,000 arising from the development of the Gatchell House site to provide a 3rd squash court at the Wyvern Club in Taunton. Any expenditure will be dependent on the Club having an ‘open access’ policy for new squash members (at present membership of the Club is restricted to those working for local government organisations).

TONE LEISURE LIMITED ACTIVITIES

Young Persons' Activity Zone Funding Success

Sport England South West have confirmed funding of up to £93,190 to convert and refurbish a currently poorly used area (the bar and upper floor) of Blackbrook Pavilion into a young persons' health, fitness and activity facility. The facility will be accessible for 6 to 16 year olds in separated age groupings under permanently supervised conditions (with specially qualified and trained staff).

The funding will include specialist children's health and fitness equipment, the delivery of the activity programmes for these ages and the staff to deliver the programme.

Walk Well in Taunton

This 8 week programme began again in March and will run until May. The first 4 walks have gone extremely well, with an average of 21 on each walk. In total, there have been 87 participations and **ONE-THIRD** of those have been from **NEW walkers**. The walks programme is driven by volunteers who are keen on helping others to become more physically active to improve their health.

Community Cardiac Rehabilitation Programme at Wellsprings

This programme had some 'limelight' in the press recently through a report and photograph which highlighted the first successful patients to have completed the 6 week Rehab course of Exercise and Lifestyle advice. The programme was established with the support of Taunton Deane PCT and Tone Leisure and with funding from the British Heart Foundation. A good number of the patients are maintaining their more physically active lifestyle at the Tone Leisure Centres, following completion of their course.

MS Society

Tone Leisure are currently in discussion with the MS Society about the possibility of helping them to establish an exercise session for their members at the Blackbrook Pavilion.

VIBE

This young persons' (13 to 19 years) diversionary activity programme at Wellsprings is still going strong with around 40 young people attending each week. It is working well with the Sexual Health Clinic that runs from 5.30-7.00 pm on Friday at Wellsprings and young people also had smoking cessation advice from the PCT. Joel Chapman, Alison Cottey and Youth Workers attended the afternoon workshop with the PCT around healthy eating and getting the right messages across to young people. We hope to introduce this theme to VIBE in the next 3 month programme. The Youth Workers are working with a group to form a VIBE football team to enter into a tournament with other youth groups taking place in the Easter holidays at Burnham-on-Sea. VIBE will provide them with kit and the Youth Service will arrange transport and a team manager. Blackbrook are struggling with numbers so extra promotion in schools and with

Clare Stewart and the Local Area Teams is taking place, as well as targeted youth work in Halcon, Lane and Lambrook. Another drive will be made with the launch of the Young Persons' Activity Zone.

Holiday VIBE

A programme of VIBE activity in the Easter holidays has been planned in partnership with the Youth Service, Connexions and Avon and Somerset Constabulary.

- Wellsprings - Monday, 3rd and Tuesday, 4th April - 2-5 pm
- Blackbrook - Monday, 10th and Tuesday, 11th April - 2-5 pm
- Galmington Playing Fields Football Sessions - Wednesday, 5th and Wednesday, 12th April - 2-4 pm
- Lyngford Park Football Sessions - Thursday, 6th and Thursday, 13th April - 2-4 pm

Facility Investment

- Refurbishment to Blackbrook Pavilion changing rooms starts over Easter. The works will include new shower cubicles, lockers, wall covering and flooring.
- The Sports Hall at Wellington Sports Centre is being repainted over Easter and remedial works to the footbaths in the changing rooms are being carried out.
- The Reception and entrance area at St. James Street Baths is being improved to offer an open Reception area, which will enable a much improved level of customer service to be offered.

Sand Wedge Café

Tone Leisure will be working in partnership with Food 4 You, who will operate the Sand Wedge Café. Work is currently in progress to equip the kitchen and outdoor seating area in time for opening on Good Friday.

The Café will provide hot and cold drinks and freshly prepared snacks in an informal and family focused environment.

Golf Professional Service

April will see the launch of a group and individual teaching service at Vivary. The service will be provided by PGA Professional James Smallacombe and Assistant Richard Coffin. The newly constructed practice area will be used for many of the lessons.

Taunton Tennis Club

The future of Taunton Tennis Club and the Tennis Centre have taken a significant step forward by deciding to bring the Tennis Club under the

management of Tone Leisure. From 1st April, 2006 the Tennis Club was known as Taunton Tennis Club with all tennis activities at Blackbrook headed by the tennis team, comprising of Michele Hewitt (Tennis Manager), Simon Woodhill (Head Coach), Richard Stock (Junior Development Officer), Shaun Carroll (Performance Coach) and Michael Lemon (Trainee Tennis Coach). Members' interests are represented by a Members Committee, with Helen Lawy as Chair.

This exciting new venture will spell an end to the complicated and confusing arrangement where both of the organisations ran side by side, often competing for members and users.

Taunton to Become Six Indoor, Six Outdoor Facility

Taunton Tennis Club and Tone Leisure as a whole is very excited to announce that Taunton Tennis Club will be getting two new indoor courts. We will be converting the two outdoor acrylic courts to a macadam surface, fabric-framed build. This is a brick structure up to a certain height with an aluminium frame built into it, with a fabric roof that slots into the frame. The extra courts, which should be ready by the end of the summer, along with the addition of the four outdoor courts from the merger, will make Taunton Tennis Club one of the biggest Tennis Clubs in the South West and an important regional centre for tennis. The Lawn Tennis Association is providing £200,000, the Council £90,000 and loaning Tone Leisure £60,000.

NET-WORKING

I attended the LGA Rural Commission with Cllr Chris Hill:

Elinor Goodman Chair of the Affordable Housing Rural Commission said that its report would be published on 17th May and that Regional Spatial Strategies should not be signed off by the Secretary of State unless rural needs could be met. She asked that evidence of impact into second homes should be sent to Jo. Lavis@defra.gsi.goc.uk. Sir Simon Milton spoke on driving improvement in rural council and said that local government was beginning to win the argument as the leader of local delivery. Workshops included "Spreading the benefits of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics Games.

I attended the quarterly meeting of the Quantock JAC which is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year. The Sustainable Development Fund which is receiving £80K will be leveraging in a sum of just under £600K. The Volunteer Rangers have given 200 hours of quality work to the AONB i.e. on access and GIS mapping of rhododendron.

I participated in a workshop run by Culture Southwest on Culture and Local Area Agreements in the South West. This focused on the why and how of effective integration of culture in LAAs. It is much to be regretted that Somerset did not have the benefit of such a workshop before its LAA was signed off.

I also attended the Engine Room's 3rd Birthday Party and a Celebration of the work of SAW: Somersetartweeks2006 take place 9-24th September.

Councillor Mrs D Bradley

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Concillor Gwyneth Leighton - Communications

Consultation

Budget, Priorities and Perception Survey – Work is underway in preparing the Budget & Priorities Survey and will this time include some questions about people's perception of the council to assist in managing our reputation in line the LGA Reputation Project and our own Communications Strategy. The survey will also incorporate questions proposed by the Lyons Inquiry on the future of Local Government.

Public Relations and Media Relations

The department continues to be busy and has recently been working on campaigns including 'Talking Tomorrows' (Local Development Framework), Fines for Litterbugs (Fixed Penalty Notices), editorial articles for the Vision, the opening of the new play equipment in Victoria Park to name but a few.

Our coverage in the local press remains strong albeit not always positive. We are working to improve our reputation and will be concentrating on more proactive work with the media.

Deane Dispatch

The next issue of *Deane Dispatch* will be dropping through the letterboxes of Taunton Deane residents by the end of this month.

Housing Needs Survey – the aim of this is to help us understand more fully local housing needs so we can plan effectively for the future. This is being circulated to residents across the Deane as an insert in Deane Dispatch and to minimise distribution costs. To encourage participation we are inviting residents to take part in a competition and the first ten correct entries will be given a £25 supermarket voucher. The closing date for entries is 26 May 2006.

Information Management

You have before you this evening a proposal to create a new post of *Web Marketing Manager*. It is envisaged that this post will be on an invest to save basis, and will enable us to develop the website as a principal marketing tool to promote council information, services, events and initiatives. Furthermore, it will develop customer access for all sections of the community and will promote the take up of e-services.

The State of the Borough – I reported on this at our last Full Council Meeting and several members requested an outline presentation as well as a full briefing on this. As a result we have arranged two sessions for members. Firstly, Ruth James's presentation this evening – provides a brief glimpse that the Local Futures' Audit can provide us with an overarching analysis of 'well-

being' in the Borough. This is done by comparing it with, and benchmarking it against, other authorities in Britain. Performance has been judged by seeing how Taunton Deane scores on a range of economic, social and environmental measures. Secondly, 'Local Futures' will be presenting the findings more extensively to us at the special Review Board meeting on May 25th and I would encourage you to attend this. It is our opportunity to challenge and understand if we are focussing on the right actions, in the right areas in key policy documents such as the Corporate Strategy, Community Strategy and future Economic and Regeneration Strategy. It also provides opportunities in the future for improved debate of ward based issues through an introduction of the Local Knowledge database.

Finally ... my thanks to those members and staff who attended the excellent workshop on 'weblogging' presented by Griff Wigley from the ODPM. It was a worthwhile session which gave us many ideas on how we can use this tool as councilors to engage with our communities and senior officers to keep staff abreast of new developments and other things of interest to them.

Gwyneth Leighton
Executive Councillor for Communications

April 2006

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Cavill

Economic, Asset Management and Tourism

Asset Management

Work has now started on industrial units at Blackdown Business Park, in Wellington. The completion date is August 2006, and the contractor is ROK. This is a scheme to assist young and enterprising new businesses.

At the moment the Land Registry have given us an opportunity for registration of land at an attractive rate. This work involves many sections of the Council, and is essential in order to clearly define our assets.

There are a considerable number of projects underway at the moment including modifications for DDA work in Deane House, alterations to the Circle, a new bike shelter and possible addition of extra showers in Deane House. Plans for 28-34 Fore Street, Wellington, continue to be further examined. A report has been prepared for the Review Panel, detailing the modified work to the toilet facilities adjacent to the Committee rooms.

We are awaiting approval from the PCT with regard to the alterations to the Bike Park in St James Street. Work is likely to commence in approximately 8 weeks time on the pop-up toilet in the High Street in Taunton.

Economic Development

Taunton Deane has been awarded £119,074.01 under the Local Authority Business Growth Initiative LABGI. This money is based on the increase of Business Rate base income, which is in excess of the agreed 2003 base level. It is hoped that with further redevelopment work within Taunton and surrounding areas, next years' award will be larger.

The casino bid has been completed and was delivered to DCMS on 31st March. Comprehensive consultations are being planned for April through to June, and there is a draft update report going to Review Board on 20th April.

In conjunction with Wellington Economic Partnership, a Wellington Task Force is being created to develop a number of projects aimed at improving the attraction of Wellington Town Centre to visitors and residents alike. We are assessing the results of the recent Wellington Food Check, which will assist one of the projects involving the promotion of local and specialist foods.

In partnership with Taunton Chamber of Commerce and Taunton School Enterprises, a business fair is being organised, which will take place on Thursday 18th May. The purpose of the event is to bring to one place organisations that provide information services to businesses, so that any business in Taunton Deane could find the answers to questions they might have about business start-ups and assist existing businesses in running a

successful enterprise. There will also be a number of other businesses exhibiting, giving them the opportunity to promote their products and to network with other members of the business community. There will also be three seminars during the evening, given by Connecting Somerset, Clerks Room and Taunton Vision.

Tourism and TIC

Taunton TIC has won the National Express agent of the Year for the UK – congratulations are due to all the staff at the Taunton TIC who have put in such hard work, as well as the new partner agency at Wellington Community Office.

There have now been in excess of 40000 'Heart of Somerset' Visitor Guides distributed. This is c15000 more than this time last year. Whilst this is going on, a new Guide is being prepared for publication in summer 2006, as well as updated versions of the 'Eating Out' Guides, and the 'Taunton Heritage Trail'.

The Somerset Review of Tourism has reached the stage where the consultants are working on their final report which will include an action plan and final recommendations; due to be published by the end of April.

Taunton Town Centre Company

Taunton and Bristol are two of twenty cities and towns in the country chosen by the Liveability Minister, Baroness Andrew, to get help to accelerate the economic improvement of town centres. Local business partnerships will be engaged in developing business improvement districts (bids). The two-year project is aimed at reducing crime and anti-social behaviour as well as improving the town environs and promoting the town as a visitor destination. This represents a fantastic opportunity to further improve our quality of life and business in the area.

Councillor Norman Cavill

COUNCIL MEETING – 18 APRIL 2006.

Report of Councillor Mark Edwards – Environmental Services

1.0 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH.

1.1 Licensing.

Preparations continue for the implementation of the Gambling Act 2005, that will transfer additional responsibilities to the Local Authority from 2007. However before this time the Council has to create and agree a new Gambling Licensing Policy. Officers are currently working on a draft of this policy ready for extensive consultation later this year.

1.2 Health and Safety.

As part of the support for Local Authorities in delivering the FIT3 programme, a recent training and briefing day was held in Taunton for local HSE and LA health and safety practitioners. The day focused on the details of the national projects and campaigns for enforcement for the first half of next years work programme to enable health and safety practitioners to make the most effective contribution to incidence reduction by working in partnership and contributing to the Health and Safety Commission's targets. The Health and Safety Teams work programme for the coming year will be in line with this guidance.

The Fit3 strategic programme (Fit for Work, Fit for Life, Fit for Tomorrow) priority topics are Stress, Slips and Trips, Transport Safety, Musculoskeletal Disorders, Occupational Asthma and Falls from Height.

1.3 Food Safety.

Routine Food Safety Inspections.

The Team has achieved 100% of the target for the inspection of food premises during 2005/06. 496 initial inspections have been carried out, resulting in 47 follow-up visits. Targets are set by the Food Standards Agency and are an annual challenge, it is to the Team's credit that these results have been achieved.

Safer Food ~ Better Business.

Three of the seven Seminars in this training programme for small food businesses have now been completed and a number of follow-up coaching sessions have taken place. The Programme has been designed to help independent food businesses implement changes in Food Safety law. Feedback from those attending the Seminars has been extremely positive. The Programme runs until the end of May 2006.

1.4 Environmental Protection.

Seizure of Noise Equipment.

Team members seized stereo equipment from a Wellington resident under the authority of a Warrant issued by Taunton Deane Magistrates.

Neighbours had complained of loud music continuing late into the night over an extended period and the seizure action took place after a Noise Abatement Notice had been ignored. The operation involved two members of the Environmental Protection Team, two Police Officers and a locksmith in case access to the flat was denied.

During the seizure, the owner of the equipment became obstructive and was arrested for breach of the peace but released later without charge. It is likely that a prosecution for failing to comply with an Abatement Notice will now follow and, if successful, the Council will make an application to the Court for an Order for the permanent confiscation of the equipment taken.

Re-Location of Air Quality Monitoring Equipment.

After a period of two years in Priory Avenue, the trailer-mounted Air Quality Monitoring Equipment will shortly be moved to an area close to the roundabout at the intersection of Silk Mills and Wellington Roads. The equipment monitors Nitrogen Dioxide and Particulates and it is used to confirm computer modelling of these pollutants in key traffic areas within the Borough. Results obtained from long term monitoring will also be used to inform decisions concerning the need or otherwise for additional Air Quality Management Areas.

2.0 WASTE and RECYCLING SERVICES

Sort It!

Plans for the roll out of Phase 3 of SORT IT! are well underway. Containers and service information leaflets will start to be delivered to the 15,000 Phase 3 properties during week commencing 11.4.06 and the first collections will take place on 2 May 2006. The fourth and final phase of the Sort it services will be rolled out in October.

Litter Control

Promotional work to support the start of the partnership scheme between TDBC and Avon and Somerset Police is underway. The scheme will allow new powers to be used to serve Fixed Penalty Notices on people who drop litter. The promotional days on 7th, 12th, and 19th April are featuring the "Rubbish Heads" street theatre and a display in Taunton Town Centre, and this has already created good media coverage of the issue.

Councillor Mark Edwards

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Garner – Housing Services

Although there is much going on as usual within Housing Services, there is one major issue in particular that is focusing the minds of the Housing Services Management Team at the moment and this will be the subject of this report. I refer to the recent management changes in connection with the Housing Stock Transfer project team and the process itself.

Carl Brazier's experience and skill in housing related project management has left a considerable void within the Housing Stock Transfer Project (HSTP), therefore the challenge is to achieve a seamless transfer of project management whilst maintaining forward momentum with the HSTP

It was decided to freeze frame the process to take stock of where we are and what is left to do operationally. We also had to consider HSTP management options e.g. Do we parachute in a professional who will be able to take over the management reigns or take the opportunity to review the existing arrangements? In the absence of being able to identify a professional who could take over the reigns and hit the ground running, this forced us to review management arrangements internally.

It is proposed that the project team will be dismantled in its current guise and the HSTP will be integrated into the mainstream housing business thus enabling more management and staff to become involved. This is no reflection on the previous staff or arrangements but changing circumstances require a different solution. Certain members of the project team will be retained exclusively for the project. and PWC our lead advisors, will provide additional resources to support the new management arrangements.

Malcolm Western who was acting head of Housing under transitional arrangements has now had his appointment as Head of Housing confirmed, an appointment in my view which is well deserved. With his confirmed appointment comes much of the responsibility for delivering the HSTP, it is expected that he will dedicate 2-3 days per week exclusively on the project. This extra responsibility will clearly place additional pressure on housing management hence some additional support and back filling will be required.

We will also take the opportunity to enhance governance arrangements, as it is believed that although the project team had a good working relationship with all stakeholders the Council and CMT much less so. By bringing the HSTP process in harness with the mainstream business we can further develop, enhance and cement relationships between the Council and all other stakeholders.

The above changes will result in a delay in the ballot and, as a result, will require further resources. In order to give the new management arrangements time to familiarise and bed-in to the job it is proposed that the project timetable be extended to December 2006. From a funding perspective there will be additional costs but these will be mitigated as much as possible through offsets by utilising exiting housing resources.

The most expensive element of as additional cost will be the advisors. The total additional cost is prudently estimated at circa £180k of which consultants comprise circa £114k. It cannot be denied that the extra time and expenditure is unwelcome however we have had to respond to a change in circumstances. If we are to capitalise on the excellent work undertaken by the project team to date then the extra investment is worthwhile. Failure in the project due to lack of information to tenants will cost this authority and the Council Tax payer considerably more.

Councillor Greg Garner

COUNCIL MEETING 18 APRIL 2006

Report of Councillor Terry Hall - Resources

E-Government 2006

BVPI 157

We have reported 99% of the interactions included in the BVPI 157 measure as now being E-Enabled. This nationally agreed list of interactions cover all aspects of our service – leading to around 461 different services we have had to e-enable to meet the target.

Priority Outcomes

We have completed 91% of the 'required' and 'good' priority outcomes mandated by the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). The remainder will be completed when the new systems for Revenues and Benefits and Housing are live, and sign up to Government Connect for authentication services is complete.

Web Traffic

Our web site is now handling unprecedented levels of traffic – page views have grown from around 80,000 per month 12 months ago to well over 200,000 now (with a record 230,000 in March this year). The number of unique visitors has shown a similar increase – from around 15,000 per month to over 45,000. This growth can be attributed to a number of things:

- Work done by the Web Strategy Officer in improving the site's visibility within the Google and other search engines, and improving the quality and consistency of information published on the site.
- Work done by the ICT Unit in improving the accessibility, reliability, performance and transactional capabilities of the site.
- Work done by the E-Government officer in ensuring all services are represented on the site, and that the above E-government targets are being met.
- Growing realisation by service managers that the web site should not be seen as an afterthought when planning new projects.
- Growing expectations of citizens and business that council services should be available on the Internet.

Site Area	Percentage of Page Views
Planning	24%
Home Page	11%
Heart of Somerset – Where to Stay	4%
Councillors and Committees	4%
Interactive Maps	3%
My Property Information	2%
Local Plan	2%
Service A-Z	2%

Waste Services	2%
Heart of Somerset	2%

The above table shows the top 10 most visited areas of the site - demonstrating the huge popularity of the Planning site.

We have plugged these usage figures into a savings calculation model built by SOCITM, and some staggering numbers are generated:

Research carried out by Warwickshire County Council suggests that 57% of people using a council web site would seek to contact the council via alternative methods (visit to the office, telephone, letter, etc) if the web site was not available.

Based on our 40,000 unique visitors to www.tauntondeane.gov.uk per month, these visits would cost us about £70,000 per month to deal with, compared with about £5,000 for the equivalent web site costs – so the use of the web site is effectively saving us £65,000 per month in freed up officer time etc. Factoring in the remaining 43% of visitors, who, whilst not freeing officer time by replacing a ‘traditional’ contact with an electronic one, are still receiving a service from the authority, leads to a figure around £1.2 million worth of services being delivered via the web site each year.

SOCITM Better Connected Report

The recently published Better Connected 2006 report is an in-depth look at all council web sites in the UK. A more detailed analysis of the report and actions plan will be prepared later, but some key points are listed below:

- In terms of overall functionality, our site web site is in the top 100 (of 468) sites. This is based on transactional capability, how many of a suite of questions could the site ‘answer’.
- Our site is in the top 100 in terms of usage (reflecting the huge increase in usage discussed previously)
- The site must be easy to find. The recent work done by the Web Strategy Officer has helped move our site much further up the ranking within search engines such as Google. The amount of traffic coming to our site from Google has increased by nearly 300% since 2004.
- Once on the site, the information and services must be easy to find. This combines the A-Z, keyword search facility and other mechanisms for finding information. The Web Strategy Officer identified some weaknesses in this aspect of our site, and as a result a powerful new search facility combining the A-Z and keyword searching has been procured – due live this week.
- Accessibility – adherence to guidelines provided by RNIB, WAI as mandated by the priority outcomes. In our experience, many sites pay lip service to these guidelines – claiming higher levels of accessibility than is actually the case. At the moment, many sites driven by commercial content management systems fail this test. We have taken a rigorous approach from day one on this, sometimes at the risk of appearing inflexible to people wanting to publish information on the web site. The SOCITM report vindicates this approach, as ours was one of only 25 sites singled out for a mention in this category.
- Publishing of leaflets – we are occasionally guilty of taking a PDF of a paper based leaflet and publishing it on our web site without giving too much thought to how it would appear. For example, some paper leaflets need to be folded in a particular way in order to flow properly, and the PDF version can look very odd, with panels upside down etc.

- Readability – use of plain English through out the site is needed
- Resilience – the site must be available when people need it. Our site has improved and is currently at 99.75% availability (based on 24/7/365).
- Consistency - all areas of the site share similar style and navigation. One of the reviewer's comments that sometimes increased functionality has been provided by 'bolt-ons' from third party suppliers, which compromises this consistency. We continue to strive to maintain this, but enforcement in the guise of high-level web strategy post is needed.
- Security – both site visitor and site owner need to be protected from malicious attack.

As our web site continues to grow in usage, the value of this resource to citizens and businesses as a key part of our customer access strategy is being recognised. However, there is a danger that with the cessation of e-government funding, our ability to maintain and develop the site in the future will be compromised. In particular, the need for a high level role ensuring consistent and sensible use of the site across the whole organisation must be recognised. As TDBC goes through potentially the most significant changes in its history, with the potential Housing Stock transfer, and the ISIS project causing the possible fragmentation of services, it is vital that a clear strategy for the use of the web site is in place. A strategic post with the remit to create and implement this strategy is needed.

Corporate Property Services

The Corporate Property Services Group (a group of council officers comprising four teams - Facilities Management, Asset Holdings, Geographical Information Systems and Maintenance and Design) provide various back room, predominantly building related, functions for the Council. Two of the most important are those concerning the monitoring of energy usage and of providing cost effective solutions to reduce wasteful consumption.

From this financial year, a new easy system of ensuring individual managers are informed of gas, electricity and water consumed within their buildings is being incorporated. This will enable managers to check on wastage and to take appropriate action.

An easy brief guide is also being produced. This will list simple cost effective measures that managers can incorporate within their own teams .For example, leaving I.T monitors on standby uses electricity, ensuring lights are only switched on when required or informing Property Services if the water temperature in taps is too hot so that thermostats can be reset are simple actions requiring no money. These suggestions and many more, if they are followed, should ensure a reduction in consumption with little or no cost.

Alternative energy saving measures are also being investigated - the use of CHP units (Combined Heat and Power), the replacement of w.c cisterns from 9 litre capacity to 6 litres, light switching - sometimes one switch controls a whole bank of lights when only one light is required etc. Hopefully some of these suggestions, should they prove to be cost effective, will be incorporated in the not to distant future.

It is also planned that consumption figures will be published in the Councils Asset Management Plan (an annual document that highlights how the Council has dealt

with its built assets during the preceding year and its plans for the future.) so that Members will know how individual buildings have performed.

Financial Services

The Financial Services Unit have now completed the work on the 2006/07 budget and work has begun on the closedown of the 2005/06 financial year. The outturn for 2005/06 will be reported to the Executive in June. The Statutory Annual Statement of Accounts will be reported to Corporate Governance Committee also in June.

In recent weeks we have been rolling out to Members a series of Financial Awareness Training for Councillors sessions. We were encouraged to see 9 members attend each of the 3 sessions and we trust they found it useful. We have recently also hosted a visit by our local inspector from HM Revenue & Customs who was looking at the Council's compliance on various VAT matters.

Work has been progressing on updating the Council's Annual Efficiency Statement, which details the level of efficiencies the Council expects to obtain during 2006/07. This has to be submitted to the ODPM during April.

Revenues

Payment kiosks at the Deane House-the 1 April, being the first payment date for this year's Council Tax instalments, has represented the first major test for the payment kiosks. Queues have developed at times as anticipated. However, so far these queues have not become unreasonably long and the measures we have implemented to help minimise them appear to have worked. There is a fair amount of dissatisfaction amongst customers about having to use the machines, but this also appears to be having the desired effect of encouraging some customers to switch to other payment methods.

Revenues & Benefits IBS System Conversion – work to convert our existing Revs & Bens systems is progressing well. Training of key staff has been undertaken and April will see the first conversions of test data for Council Tax. Actual live conversion is still scheduled for the beginning of July.

Council Tax & Business Rates collection – the end of year collection statistics are 98.8% for Business Rates and 98.0% for Council Tax. This means we have hit the target for Business Rates and are only 0.1% below target for Council Tax. Both represent a significant achievement in view of the high staff turnover within Revenues during the year and the diversion of resource to the system conversion project.

Year-End for Council Tax & Business Rates – the annual billing process was undertaken in late February/early March and went very smoothly with all bills being issued on time.

Benefits

The first 3 months of this year has seen a slight decline in our claims processing times. The closure of the offices over the Christmas and New Year period impacted on our turnaround times in January. Staff had to receive refresher training in fraud awareness and verification as well as get to grips with legislative changes which came into force at the beginning of April. Together with the mass re-calculation of claims and some staff having to assist in the data cleansing exercise in preparation for the switch to our new computer system, our turnaround time for new claims

increased to 30 days for the 4th quarter of 2005/06 compared to 20 days during the first 3 quarters.

It is anticipated the service's turnaround times for claims and changes in circumstances will not start to improve until the 3rd quarter of 2006/7 once the new computer system is in place and staff get used to it.

The Benefits Advice Team continue to provide a good service to benefit customers. It answers around 90% of calls within 30 seconds and only 3% of callers were unable to get through to the team during March. Customers who have used the fast-track service for dealing with changes in circumstances are very positive about the service. When members of the team are not answering calls, they are 'pre-assessing' claims and contacting customers, if needed, to get claims at a 'ready to be assessed' stage much quicker.

Enclosed in every Council Tax bill issued in March was a coupon inviting tax payers to make a claim for Council Tax Benefit. Over 250 coupons have been received, unfortunately a large majority of them are from customers who have too much capital/savings to qualify. We have tried to contact all customers wanting to claim and have arranged home visits or appointments with a Benefit Officer to go through the claim process. Pensioners who are successful can have their Council Tax Benefit backdated 52 weeks.

The Overpayment and Investigation team had a good end to the year. They worked tirelessly to ensure we issued as many court judgements against debtors and penalties against fraudsters to maximise income from subsidies before the subsidy arrangements changed at the end of March.

A further 2 Benefit Officers started working from home at the beginning of April, bringing the total number of officers working from home to 10 (just **over a quarter** of our workforce).

Personnel and Payroll

The team remains very busy supporting the ISIS and Stock Options processes, providing Human Resource input and support. The job evaluation review is well underway with a project board set up and works on planning and resorting the project commenced. The Benefits unit will be the first to have jobs analysed and evaluated.

The plans for staff car parking have involved a number of discussions with unison and communication with staff. An implementation date of 1 July is planned.

Other work has involved coordinating and reporting the implications of the one day strike over proposed pensions changes, planning an extensive leadership and change management training programme, continuous management development and co-ordinating the Skills for Life initiative. Work to improve the management of sickness absence is also a high priority.

Customer Services

Customer Services are continuing to perform well – there is still a small agency presence, which is being monitored according to the on-going needs of service provision. The expected reduction in call levels from the removal of the bulk of the benefit calls has not occurred and call volumes are still extremely high. This will

have an impact on our need to continue with temporary staff at least for the time being. CSA's are still dealing with more than 100 calls per day each against an ideal level of 75 – this is partly due to a sickness bug, which has been affecting the team recently.

In partnership with Revenues, a number of measures were put in place to assist with the beginning of the new financial year and CTAX payments resuming (leaflets, dedicated information point at reception). These appeared to have assisted in a smooth transition to the payment kiosk although customers are still unhappy by its introduction.

The end of the e-gov programme has provided us with the opportunity to look at our needs for information management going forward as an authority and permission was received recently to continue the e-gov role (in a slightly different format) within Customer Services but linked directly to IT and service unit needs.

Design and Print

The new printer arrived at the end of March and the team, whilst still getting to grips with the new technology, have started to make good use of its services. The output quality is of an exceptionally high standard and leaflets etc, which have been produced so far, have allowed us to take forward our ability to provide professional literature. Design is currently working with the Communications team on the development of literature styles so that we can take the “professional” look even further for the authority.

Corporate Administration

The introduction of the new security pass system went extremely smoothly and their ability to handle the running of the whole project at very short notice was well co-ordinated. Word Processing is working with the Communications team on the development of a new style guide for the authority providing templates to assist everyone with standardising styles.

The cost of Members postage has reduced from £10k to £5k between 2003/4-2005/6

Councillor Terry Hall

I apologise to members for the length of this report, however I have left out some items e.g. ISIS for the sake of brevity.