

## Part ii – Reports from the Executive

### COUNCIL MEETING 20 FEBRUARY 2007

#### Report of Councillor Williams – Leader of the Council

Since my last report to Full Council 12 December the ballot for housing stock transfer to a stand alone housing association has resulted in a “no” vote. This Council fully respects that decision and will do all possible to minimize the effect on tenants and staff because of the funding constraints this has caused. Papers are before you at this meeting to confirm the severe cuts necessary in order for us to meet the “Decent Homes” standard required in the allotted time. It is with great regret these savings include the loss of a total of 14 full time jobs, it is sad to think that these same staff could have been gainfully employed in serving the tenants best interests had the result been different. It is worth reflecting on what has been actually lost from Taunton Deane because seeds of uncertainty were sown during the consultation process. Below is a table setting out the amount returned to central government from tenants’ rents that we collect, and the shortfall in funding to meet the “Decent Homes” standard;

Year	Subsidy from rent to* Central Govt	Shortfall of finances to meet Decent Homes Standard
	£ millions	£ millions
2007/08	4.6	1.85
2008/09	5.0	1.85
2009/10	5.5	1.85
2010/11	<u>5.5</u>	<u>1.85</u>
Totals	£20.6	£7.40

\* Estimated for 2008/09 and beyond

In accordance with assurances given that we will pursue alternative funding we have requested our MP to take up the case for us. It is totally wrong that in exercising freedom of choice tenants should be so heavily penalised and lose the enormous amount of £28 million pounds from the economy of Taunton Deane over four years, most of which comes straight from the tenants’ pockets via rents.

#### Local Government Reorganisation

In respect of the White Paper issued by Government the County Council decided unilaterally to press ahead with submission of a single Unitary bid for the whole of Somerset. We and all District Councils are unanimously opposed to this as it would result in a complete loss of focus on the needs of the local community with such an enormous administrative area and over half a million

people to serve. It would automatically result in a huge loss of local democracy as across Somerset circa 300 District and County Councillors will be replaced with only 116 elected Members. As a result the proposed new organisation would be both unwieldy and unresponsive to local needs.

I am pleased to say the majority of Members of Taunton Deane Borough Council overwhelmingly rejected the proposals for any type of Unitary authority for Somerset due to the obvious problems that would arise in managing such a large geographical area and relative sparsity of population. The loss of localism was of great concern to most Members. All other Districts expressed the same concerns but South Somerset DC felt this could be addressed by the Unitary process but two such authorities for Somerset. They proposed incorporating Mendip DC within their own bid. This was not supported by Mendip DC nor indeed by ourselves, Sedgemoor and West Somerset DC's.

In response we have prepared a submission to Government called Team Somerset, how we can maintain democracy local to our communities but deliver our services with greater effectiveness and efficiency by enhanced partnership working. We have gained the support of all District Councils across Somerset for this approach, even South Somerset in the event that their two Unitary proposals for Somerset is not taken forward. The strategic role of the County Council has to be recognised in dealing with the major responsibilities of highways, education and social services but with the many scattered and diverse communities across Somerset it needs the detailed knowledge and local democracy of the District and Borough Councils to deliver the needs of the community. This ensures we continue with local representation, local decision making and deliverable from local resources.

#### Improving Services in Somerset (ISiS)

A key part of delivering more efficient service to our communities is the ISiS bids of BT, Capita and IBM presently being evaluated. The proposals will lead to a major public/private partnership to bring substantial investment to Taunton Deane and across Somerset. This will extend partnership working to previously unthinkable heights, incorporating the major administrative services of both Taunton Deane and Somerset County Council, with Avon and Somerset Police now having confirmed their intention of joining the partnership.

I do also see this as an excellent vehicle for delivering the efficiencies and underpinning an effective partnership working right across Somerset that will be demanded of us when implementing Team Somerset. In this respect all other District Councils in Somerset have agreed they will join the ISiS partnership if Partnership working is the way Somerset local governance proceeds. The benefits of these proposals are enormous for our communities and must not be ignored. Equally I believe the organisation we are creating will become a beacon for other three tier areas as to how best local governance can be achieved in the most effective and efficient manner. It will be a method that will avoid the huge risks in terms of disruption, loss of local

democracy and financial costs associated with the major reorganisation that would occur for a single Unitary Authority.

I am equally proud to say that Taunton Deane Borough Council has an unarguable record of “partnership working”, so our Team Somerset approach together with the ISiS project is based on substance, not just words. We have clearly demonstrated we can deliver better and more efficiently across a whole range of services with partnership working. The Government and the County Council keep talking about two tier (should be three tier!) local government being inefficient and uneconomic, but do not back this up with any substantiation, particularly when asked to justify the statements in light of the Government’s own statistics as prepared by CIPFA.

### Budget Setting

Talking of “efficiencies” I must commend our prudent, balanced budget to you. This has been achieved against the backdrop of unbudgeted, large extra costs, but without using valuable reserves and with only a 2% increase in Council Tax which only represents 5p per week on a Band D rate. We have listened to our community and delivered a below inflation Council Tax increase to ensure we assist those on relatively fixed incomes and thus most hit by increased costs beyond their control.

As always the budget setting process is very challenging as we must continue to deliver the first rate services we provide as an “Excellent” Council but also we have targeted £125,000 of extra funds for important new initiatives that will provide benefit across the community.

The difficult decisions we have taken in earlier years are definitely bearing fruit as we are delivering better services for less, together with delivering the savings imposed on us by central Government. It is worth noting that to the end of 2005/06 we were scheduled to make savings under the Gershon plan of £289,000 we in fact achieved £723,000, an extra saving of 150% over that required. However, even with these extra savings and more efficient services we cannot become complacent because our medium term financial plan still shows us running into deficit. This is why we need to implement major changes through the ISiS project and the Somerset Waste Partnership to seek even greater savings so we may address the perennial problem of costs outstripping our resources.

### Project Taunton

At our December meeting I referred to this as having taken a quantum leap forward, I am pleased to say it is now gaining a momentum of its own and the level of quality interest in our proposals is providing its drive. We received a considerable number of high quality bids to the extent that following evaluation we ended up with six bidders of the highest calibre meeting the prequalification requirements. These are now being invited to prepare proposals for development and their offer for the Firepool site, bearing in mind we are seeking a partnership arrangement to maximise the site value.

In order to implement Project Taunton we have to acquire substantial areas of land and property to assemble the site, provide access roads and flood prevention. This has been partnership working at its best with the Environment Agency providing detailed flood prevention plans, the County Council substantial funding from Government via its Local Transport Plan 2 and the South West Regional Development Agency providing in excess of £6 million for acquisition of the land and property. It is a huge credit to our Officers and the Project Taunton Team that all this is being achieved in a timely manner to allow successful site development.

The final piece of the jigsaw has also dropped into place with the conclusion of a deal to relocate Taunton Livestock Market. It is with regret that the new location will be junction 24 but as I have reported for some time, the final location was going to be decided by market forces despite the fact that we had already granted planning consent for a new market site within Taunton Deane at junction 26. We are advised the relocation should be occurring during Autumn 2007 which fits well with the development proposals for the Firepool site.

The cricket ground plans are also well advanced with the application now submitted for phase 1, being the new stand with flats over on the site partially on the adjacent Coal Orchard car park. This really does signify the commencement of the construction phase of Taunton's regeneration as it is anticipated work will commence on site in September 2007. Discussions are presently ongoing with the Cricket Club and developers about the use of the car park and provision of high quality public realm space in an area between the site, Brewhouse and the river, the suggested name for this area is "Somerset Square".

I believe these are exciting times for Taunton Deane as we are now seeing the culmination of many years of hard work and careful planning becoming reality. Taunton as a vibrant, revitalised centre will certainly establish itself as a major centre in the South West.

#### Affordable Homes

This is a top priority of our administration and again I feel our efforts are beginning to secure real opportunities for the desperately needed social and affordable housing in the Deane. We must remember that ARK Consultants forecast an annual need of 564 affordable dwellings per annum for some years to come. This has risen from the earlier report by David Couttie of 131 houses per annum that was our previous target figure. This is a huge leap but indicative of the enormous cost of housing in this area, the ratio of average house price to earnings is in the order of 10 to 1, virtually the same as central London average, hence the huge unaffordability factor. If we are to seriously address this, it will take the cooperation of Members and residents alike. I can accept that change is always difficult but sometimes it has to be accepted for the greater good of the community. Without cooperation we will not get anywhere near addressing the identified need for affordable housing and we

will be failing our community by denying many the security, privacy and comfort of their own home.

One great success to report is that the site for affordable houses at Ham, near Wellington, is just about to commence (scheduled for March). It is a development of two and three bedroomed houses by a private developer and the houses will be for sale at £75,000 for the two bed and £99,000 for the three bed. This has been achieved without any public subsidy and the properties will remain affordable in perpetuity with nomination rights for subsequent re-sales vested in Taunton Deane Borough Council. Therefore we are truly helping our community now and in the future by ensuring the properties remain affordable relative to market prices for all time.

Finally

As part of the papers before you tonight we will be seeking your agreement for the early retirement of Malcolm Western, Pete Weaver and Tom Noall. These are all very long serving officers who I will be very sorry to see go as they have been dedicated and committed, to providing the excellent services we and our community have come to expect. They have made a tremendous contribution to the very successful operation of this Council and I am sure I speak on behalf of all Members when I say we are very sorry to see you go but wish you every success in the future. Thank you for your dedicated service to date.

Cllr John Williams,  
Leader, Taunton Deane Borough Council

## **COUNCIL MEETING 20 FEBRUARY 2007**

### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR MRS JOANNA LEWIN-HARRIS COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

#### **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY**

All local authorities have a statutory duty to work with partners to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). This document outlines how local organisations and agencies will work together to improve the social, economic well being of their area.

Taunton Deane Local Strategic Partnership's Sustainable Community Strategy, which is now in its final drafting stage, has been developed following Talking Tomorrow's Taunton Deane themes:

- Learning and Working
- Getting About and Finding Out
- Safer Places, Safer Communities
- Your Health and Your Home
- Where you Live, Work and Play

There are also chapters which focus on North Taunton and East Taunton in recognition of the particular levels of deprivation in these areas

Each theme starts by presenting what we know through facts, figures and trends as well as what was learnt through consultation in 'Talking Tomorrow's Taunton Deane'.

The SCS will have a 10 year lifespan, with a separate action plan which will be updated more regularly.

The Community Leadership Panel considered the SCS earlier this month. The main comments from the panel were the strategy should put greater emphasis on the needs of an aging population, and that the profile of arts and culture should be raised. The LSP will consider the final draft at its meeting on 13 March.

I am delighted to report that Talking Tomorrow's Taunton Deane won a commendation in the RTPi South West Planning Awards and came second in community planning category in the national competition. Our thanks are particularly due to Mark Leeman in the forward plan unit for this achievement.

On hearing of the award, the Manager of the Quantock Hills AONB sent an email to say:

"Well done Mark. I have long rated the effort Taunton Deane puts into genuinely getting and responding to the views of others, particularly those

impacted by the actions of the council. It is good to see this being recognized.”

## **AREA WORKING**

Taunton Deane Borough Council has long had a commitment to working at a sub-district level. As well as producing a borough wide Community Strategy, the council has developed area community plans in West Deane and the Brendons, the Wellington area, the Blackdown Hills and Taunton itself (Project Taunton). Community plans for North and East Taunton have now been drafted. The council has also supported Parish Plans. We want to build on this to deliver a more joined up approach to delivering local services and a possible model for the way forward would be through Community Partnerships, as described in the Team Somerset partnership prospectus.

Somerset County Council and the police are also moving in the same direction and we need to work closely with them as we develop these ideas.

Somerset County Council is setting up Area Working Panels in all Somerset Districts. With members of the Community Leadership Panel and several other Taunton Deane councillors, I recently attended the first meeting of the Taunton Deane Area Working Panel held in Norton Fitzwarren Village Hall. Many Parish Councils sent representatives.

Currently:

- This panel meetings are formal meetings of the County Council
- The panel members are the County Councillors for the Taunton Deane area
- Borough and Parish Councillors and other partners are welcome to attend as are members of the public
- The panel will have £180,000 a year (£15,000 for each county councillor) to spend in the local area
- Only county councillors will be able to vote on how this money is spent
- The money must be spent to deliver outcomes identified in the Local Area Agreement
- The panel elected Cllr Claire Gordon as chairman, and Cllr Stephen Martin-Scott vice chairman.
- The next meeting of the panel will be held in a couple of months' time and will concentrate on highway issues.

In the future:

- SCC intends to devolve further budgets to the Area Panel. Opinions varied as to how much of the schools budget (£228m), adult social care (£186m), highways and transport (£92m), fire brigade (£19m), waste services (£18m), or cultural services including libraries (£14m) could in practice be devolved.
- Decision-making and budgets may be devolved further into sub-district areas, but there was no consensus as to what areas these sub-districts should cover.
- The future role of borough and parish councillors in area working panels (or any future sub-district area) was unclear, with some members indicating that they might in future become full members with the right to vote.

What is clear is there is still much to do in developing area working. It is important that Taunton Deane works closely with the County Council, Parish Councils and other partners, e.g. the police, in taking ideas forward.

### **CORPORATE EQUALITY SCHEME**

I am pleased to say the Executive approved Taunton Deane's Corporate Equality Scheme last week. This sets out how the council will meet its statutory public duties to promote equality and to eliminate direct and indirect discrimination. The scheme, which includes a well researched and robust action plan, has been developed from the results of over 40 Equality Impact Assessments carried out across the council last autumn. I thank Harry Connery and Val Dale for their work in producing this excellent document.

### **Audio Loop Systems**

This council has recently invested in several loop systems to help the hard of hearing. These have been installed in reception in the Deane House and in the Wellington office. We now also have portable loop system for sheltered housing officers and a further one for use in public meetings in different venues.

I would like to give credit to Mr Fred Douglas of East Taunton whose persistence in pointing out the need for this equipment has now born fruit. Although it has taken rather longer to achieve than I had hoped, Mr Douglas was good enough write and say how pleased he was that this equipment is now available.

Joanna Lewin-Harris



## **COUNCIL MEETING 20 February 2007**

### **Report of Councillor Bishop Planning Policy and Transportation**

#### **Regional Spatial Strategy**

The Somerset County Council as the Strategic Planning Authority, under the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act was asked by the Regional Assembly to provide technical advice on the implications of the latest Office of National Statistics (ONS) Household Projections for the County area. The County Council has not been asked to conduct a public consultation on the implications of the ONS projections and the Regional Assembly has not required a formal elected member endorsement of the technical advice.

The previous projections of household growth, which were used to inform the Regional Spatial Strategy over the next twenty years, were significantly lower than the 2003 ONS figures. The revised projections are based on retaining the existing population projection but changing the assumptions around how we form households – particularly:

Increases in the likelihood of elderly people living independently – caused by increasing longevity, improved general health and financial independence amongst older people;

A reassessment of the stability of co-habiting (as opposed to married) households and identifying that co-habiting couples on average, are more likely to split up than married couples.

The technical advice prepared by Baker Associates last month considers the implications arising from a number of potential distribution scenarios for accommodating this additional housing growth. It tests the environmental, economic, social and transport implications of accommodating the additional housing growth

The study recognises that Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCT's) have the greatest opportunities for employment and the greatest levels of accessibility to services but they also have a limited capacity to accommodate additional growth. Given the constraints on SSCT's and the scale of step-change required for three SSCT's to deliver the draft Regional Spatial Strategy it is anticipated that Market Towns (Category B settlements within the RSS) should have a greater role to play in accommodating the additional growth arising as a result of the ONS household projections

A copy of the final report has now been received and I have made arrangements for a copy of the report to be available in the Members Room.

The Draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) submitted to the Government in April 2006 remains the Assembly's submitted plan. Technical advice on the 2003 Projections, provided by Strategic Authorities to the Assembly, will be

taken into account by them in their evidence to the Examination in Public (EiP) which is being held in Exeter from April to June 2007.

### **A303/A358 South Petherton to M5 Taunton**

The London to South West and South Wales Multi-Modal Study (SWARMMS) completed in 2002, provided a long term strategy to address passenger and freight transport on the main rail and road corridors between London, the South West and South Wales.

Further work was undertaken by the Highways Agency in 2004 to compare the A303/A30 between Ilminster and Honiton with an alternative improvement between Ilminster and the M5 at Taunton. This further work led to a decision by the Transport Secretary at the end of 2004 to upgrade the A358 alternative and add it to the trunk road network, thereby avoiding the environmentally sensitive AONB.

The Highways Agency have now stated that the current programme is to hold a public consultation in Spring 2007. Details of the consultation dates and deposit locations will be advertised in local newspapers and on the Highways Agency website nearer the time. The outcome of the public consultation will be a Preferred Route announcement to protect the route against development which is expected in Autumn 2007. Further work on the scheme beyond this will be dependent on decisions taken on the A303 Stonehenge scheme and subsequent rounds of the regional prioritisation process

### **Planning Applications Somerset County Cricket Club**

38/2007/025 PHASE 2 Cricket Club

Demolition of Pavilions, Stands and Subsidiary Accommodation on south side of the ground and erection of cricket school, pavilion, seating stand and 16 flats with commercial ground floor use to St James Street/Priory Avenue, Taunton.

The second planning application for Phase 1 of the development has been received but cannot be registered until further information is provided. The application is for the erection of a five storey building comprising of 65 Category II sheltered housing apartments for older people together with communal facilities, guest suite, estate managers office over Class A3 Café/Restaurant and two Class A1 Retail Units with outside terrace and covered parking area, spectator stands and groundsman's store. This application will be registered as soon as all the necessary information has been provided.

### **Councillors involvement in Planning Decisions**

The DCLG study published in January a report prepared by Arup Consultancy following surveys with Planning Officers and Councillors from

authorities across the country and has made a series of recommendations and the following are just a few of the recommendations :-

- The portfolio Holder for Planning should be closely involved with the work of the Planning Committee ; for example should sit on the Committee (but should not normally be the Chair)
- Authorities should consider the scope for Members of the Planning Committee to get more involved in policy making subject to their availability.
- Policy training should be offered to all Members and should be compulsory for all those on the planning committee.
- Authorities should update their codes of conduct to reflect support for early member involvement in pre-application discussions within clearly defined limits.( This recommendation appears to be causing a great deal of concern as most monitoring officers advise that members should not comment on planning applications prior to the application being considered by the planning committee and I think that further advice will be needed before any Planning Authority decides to accept this recommendation.)

### **Talking Tomorrows Taunton Deane**

This project reached the Finals in the RTPI National Planning Awards for Community Planning and was second to The New Heart for Oxmoor project which started ten years ago and has now transformed what was in 1999 the second most deprived estate in Cambridgeshire.

The South West Branch of the RTPI has given us a Commendation for our project and I would like to congratulate everyone who has helped us to gain this award.

**Cliff Bishop**

## **COUNCIL MEETING – 20 February 2007.**

### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR DOROTHEA BRADLEY ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES**

#### 1.0 ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH.

##### 1.1 Smokefree Preparations

From **6am on Sunday, 1 July 2007**, virtually all workplaces and substantially enclosed public areas in England will become smokefree by law. This will include restaurants, members clubs and even work vehicles that are used by more than one person. Indoor workplace smoking rooms will disappear. The Health Act 2006 and proposed subordinate Regulations provide the means to apply and regulate the ban. The new legislation empowers Local Authorities to enforce the ban and service units within the Environmental Health function are best placed to regulate this.

Authorised Officers have powers to enter premises, investigate complaints and take action against non-compliant employers, licensees or smokers through Fixed Penalty Notices or formal enforcement action. However, it is expected that strong National and Local promotional campaigns combined with support given to businesses will achieve high levels of self-regulation. This has certainly been the experience of other countries that have gone smokefree earlier.

Taunton Deane Borough Council is a key member of the Somerset Smokefree Alliance. Both locally and as part of the Alliance we intend to promote the ban, provide support to businesses and to smokers who want to quit, and apply enforcement measures once the ban is in place. We are currently planning a series of seminars and other promotional activity throughout the County to provide information and answer queries to help businesses prepare for the restrictions.

An integral part of this is a six to nine month secondment of one Environmental Health Practitioner to co-ordinate the Somerset wide response to ensure a coherent message and consistent regulation.

##### 1.2 Food Safety

The Food Safety team has recently been awarded a further £4000 grant from the Food Standards Agency to allow it to assist more businesses in implementing a new national food safety management system called "Safer Food Better Business". The authority has previously benefited from a much larger grant and has delivered seminars and coaching to many food businesses across the Borough. This additional amount will allow this work to be extended to more businesses.

##### 1.3 Health and Safety

###### Dermatitis Seminar – "Bad Hand Day"

The Health and Safety team recently organised an event for hairdressers from across Somerset. Entitled "Dermatitis in hairdressing awareness day" and it was run in partnership with the Health and Safety Executive it was attended by over 40 Somerset hairdressing business representatives and 100 students from Somerset College's hair and beauty course. The key messages for the hair & beauty trade were to use

techniques to reduce contact with water and chemicals where possible, to protect hands by wearing gloves and using moisturiser and to check regularly for signs of dermatitis. This forms part of the HSE' s national campaign to reduce dermatitis by 10% by 2008.



#### 1.4 Environmental Protection.

##### Dog Fouling

A Fixed Penalty Notice for Dog Fouling has recently been served by the Dog Warden service on a dog owner exercising a dog and failed to clear up after it in the Killams estate area.

#### 2.0 WASTE COLLECTION AND RECYCLING

##### 2.1 Recycling

The extent of the Christmas festivities in Taunton Deane can be measured by the amount of recyclable materials that were collected in January! The table below shows the amounts (in tonnes) of each material collected from the kerbside compared to December.

Material	December 06	January 07	Variance
Paper	404	408	+3
Glass	209	286	+77
Cans	37	49	+12
Food	406	445	+39
Other materials	10	12	+2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1066</b>	<b>1200</b>	<b>+134</b>

In January last year 730 tonnes of waste were collected from the kerbside for recycling and so the 1200 tonnes collected this year represents a 64% increase. It is also interesting to note that since the introduction of *SORT IT!* across the Deane we are now recycling more food waste than newspaper!

##### 2.2 Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) Procurement

The work to evaluate the bids received to run the recycling and refuse collection services across the whole of Somerset for the next seven years is continuing. Proposals to become the preferred bidder with whom the final service package will be negotiated were received on 21 December 2006 from Biffa, ECT Recycling, Sita and Veolia (formally Cleanaway).

The joint procurement by the Somerset Waste Partnership will deliver a contract that will involve the collection of dry recycling, food waste, garden waste and refuse from all the 226,000 properties in Somerset. The bidders have also submitted proposals to collect plastic bottles and cardboard packaging from the kerbside.

In addition to the procurement of the collection services the six Somerset Councils are also working towards formalising the current Partnership into a single waste board, which would take over the responsibility for waste collection and disposal.

### 3. NETWORKING

- 3.1. The River Tone Partnership comprising Lucy Ball the Town Centre Manager, the Police, the Probation Service, the SCC, Dave Durdan Chair of the Somerset Waterways Development Trust, Robbie Lowe from Project Taunton met with Tony Turner of the DLO, Drew Harris of Ecology Works and myself to discuss the work programme for the river Tone. This would be geared to the forthcoming events, namely the major cricket match of 12-14<sup>th</sup> May, the Westival and Taunton in Bloom in July, and the Cycling Tour in September. Lucy Ball suggested that the long term management and promotion of issues surrounding the river Tone be tied in with Project Taunton. There may be merit in declaring the open public spaces abutting the Tone to be one contiguous Tone Riverside Park to get us thinking holistically.
- 3.2 I have also attended on behalf of TDBC the meetings of the Taunton Town Charity which run both sheltered housing and distribute funds to those in need.
- 3.3 I attended the meeting of the Policy Review Group of the LGA Rural Commission which covered both rural Post Offices and affordable housing. The point was made that we may need to accept more housing in rural areas to ensure the sustainability of some rural settlements and also reconsider our attitude to car use and the current threshold figures.
- 3.4 The South West LGA held a meeting at the Cricket Club. This included a Reputations Workshop – from which it is clear we need to be focussed about how we label ourselves to get the message across that it is Taunton Deane Borough Council which is delivering all the services directly or indirectly to its residents. The afternoon was spent considering an interim paper from the Independent Commission chaired by Lord Best (Director of Joseph Rowntree Foundation and LGA President). It is all about how best the LGA can help local authorities respond to the challenges of the Local Government White Paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities. I would recommend reading the LGA paper “Closer to People and Places”. The government talks about devolution and localisation – the question is how to ensure this happens in practice!!!

Cllr Dilly Bradley

## **COUNCIL MEETING 20th FEBRUARY 2007**

### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR CAVILL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSET MANAGEMENT AND TOURISM**

#### **Economic Development**

We are working with Somerset Young Enterprise to roll out our Primary School Programme. So far, eighteen schools have joined the scheme, and a further two have expressed interest. Our target is 21 for this year. Three schools are from the five target schools whose intake is largely from areas in Taunton and Wellington that exhibit multiple deprivation. You should all have received a sheet from Young Enterprise Somerset asking for support, as there is a need for new business members to work with schools who enter the scheme. I hope many of my fellow councillors can consider offering support to this programme.

Consultants have been appointed for the Wondertree project. This is to examine the practicality and financial viability for a major tourism and education facility based on woodland in Taunton. The project has been included within the Taunton hub for Waterlinks. A report should be available in April/May.

A considerable amount of work and time has been spent by the Districts within Somerset, as well as the County Council, evaluating and then establishing the structure for a Somerset Inward Investment Company. If this company goes ahead it should be operating by September of this year.

I would like to extend my best wishes to Nick Coleman who was our Regeneration Officer and who has left to take up a career in Holland. It is hoped that his replacement will be in post by April.

#### **Rural Economy**

Our work to support agricultural development is continuing apace; seminars and information sessions for farmers are being delivered across the Borough. Attendance at these events has been strong and demonstrates that the participants are keen to explore the issues around diversification and skills enhancement.

An application in partnership with other Districts and the County Council for Rural Renaissance funding has been successful and will enable the development of a full network of ADOs across the County. As a result, we will receive half of the salary and costs of our ADO for the next year.

Wellington Food Town is continuing to attract interest and involvement from local business and community organisations. A meeting to discuss the next steps, held at the end of January, was well attended. The Economic Development Unit is supporting Wellington Economic Partnership in developing a management structure for the coming twelve months' programme, which of course will see a number of food related events in

Wellington. In addition there are plans for a 'Buy Local' campaign and work with schools on 'Healthy Eating and Living'. The successful bid to the 'Market and Coastal Towns Initiative' by the WEP, supported by the EDU, will bring a small amount of annual funding for the next two years. This will enable research and feasibility studies to be carried out on key economic projects in Wellington; and more importantly, will give the chance of access to RDA funding towards the cost of implementing such schemes after the initial two years.

### **Tourism**

Work continues on the development of the Destination Management System and of the Somerset Destination Management Organisation. We now have consultants working with the Steering Group, to develop a business plan for a potential new partnership. This DMO would co-ordinate tourism marketing and the handling of clients in Somerset. A report is due to be completed by the end of Spring.

Twenty six thousand Taunton Deane 'Heart of Somerset' tourism brochures have been sent out so far. This shows an Interest significantly higher than for this time last year.

There have been a considerable number of applications for the creation of new self catering holiday units; in spite of the fact that occupation levels last year were significantly below those of previous years. The EDU is liaising between applicants and the Planning Department, but there must be concern over the viability of these new developments. As such, it would now be beneficial if applicants were asked to submit business plans for the new developments as this would assist in ensuring they have taken into account the current over provision of such accommodation in Taunton Deane.

### **Arts and Creative Services**

Work to support the Creative Industries continues to be developed through the BOOST Partnership which is based in the Brewhouse Theatre. BOOST is working with a wider group of Arts Organisations across the County and with consultants in an attempt to identify how new and existing creative businesses can best be supported. The report being prepared is suggesting that there should be a closer working relationship between Economic development and Arts Support Teams throughout the County. In effect this is what we are doing, as the Arts Support function is now within the EDU, and assisting the creative industries is one of our top objectives.

### **Asset Management**

Our asset management plan is being finished and should, by this Council meeting, be up and running on our web-site. Work continues on our maintenance backlog and by the end of this financial year the vast majority of all our priority three work will be completed. There will be some notable exceptions, for example the Leisure Trust work, but this is because the scheduling for this work will run beyond the 2009/10 financial year.

The resale of Highfields will be completed before the end of this financial year



and an option appraisal of the nursery site at Mount Street is now being undertaken.

Blackdown Business Park at Wellington now has two of the units occupied and two others being assessed by prospective companies. The proposal for business units at Frobisher Way is presently out for tender. These tenders will be with us at the end of February.

The Old Municipal Building is presently having many of its artefacts removed, as all of our tenants have now relocated. The various works for DDA, Fire regulations and other improvements, as well as those works required by the County will take most of the summer. The County have stated that they will take on the lease of the OMB from 1<sup>st</sup> September, to enable the relocation of the Registrars' Office from Flook House.

We are trialling a new solar powered light at the Crematorium car park. If this proves satisfactory, not only will it produce a saving in CO2 emissions, but will also save extensive trenching and cabling work to establish the new lighting system.

### **Waterlinks**

The lottery has recently signed off the draft plan, and work is being undertaken to produce clear project briefs as well as financial projections for the delivery of each scheme. The time schedule to present the next stage of application on 31<sup>st</sup> May is extremely ambitious, particularly in view of the detailed requirements. This exciting project is now beginning to catch more and more people's imagination. Originally there were 130 applicants and Waterlinks is one of the 6 finalists. However we must remember that three of these final projects are within the South West. The publicity launch, of what will be a national campaign, will be in early April. The projects included in Waterlinks are not just the canals and rivers but also cycleways, educational projects, wetland and industrial heritage sites, the reconstruction of part of the original lake village just outside Glastonbury, hydro-turbines (revitalising 10 old mills) and a climate change centre, to list but a few.

Councillor Norman P Cavill

## **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR JOHN CLARK, LEISURE, ARTS AND CULTURE**

The Christmas edition of the Deano was sent to every primary school aged child in Taunton Deane. The Easter edition is currently in hand. Carols Around The Bandstand were organised again this year by the Friends of Vivary Park, with some financial assistance from the Council. The event was well supported despite the weather. A season of Sunday bandstand concerts, in the Vivary Park bandstand, is currently being planned.

### **Village and Community Halls**

The new Stoke St Gregory Village Hall, part grant aided by TDBC has been completed and an official opening is planned. Bishops Lydeard Village Hall, Comeytrove Community Centre, West Bagborough Village Hall and Wiveliscombe Community Centre have also received grant aid assistance and successfully completed their projects. An application for grant aid assistance towards a village hall for Langford Budville has been received. This application is currently being processed. Funding had been awarded to Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council towards a youth shelter and basketball hoop from Section 106 money.

### **Sports & Physical Activity Strategy**

This has been completed and will be published in early 2007. This strategy will direct the future of sport and physical recreation in the Borough up to the Olympics in 2012.

The Friends of French Weir Park group has been successfully formed. This has permitted an application to Heritage Lottery Fund to be submitted for project development funding for French Weir Park.

A report has been commissioned on the scale and adequacy of freely available youth facilities across the Borough.

A residents consultation for Higher Holway Open Space has been carried out and a landscape architect commissioned to design the space to provide play facilities, youth activity area, picnic and viewing area and a wildlife woodland.

Holway Local Action Team has assisted with an application to the Lottery for Breathing Spaces funding to provide the wildlife woodland and training and promotion about the wildlife habitats and its benefits.

### **Tennis**

Blackbrook Tennis Centre extension has been completed and opened to the public. This low cost facility improves our already top quality provision which gives us 6 indoor and 6 outdoor courts.

## **Tone Leisure (Taunton Deane) Ltd Facility News**

Recent and forthcoming improvements to facilities include:

- **St. James Street Baths**

Installation of more customer focused Reception area, refurbishment and redecoration of entrance and lobby area.

- **Blackbrook Pavilion and Tennis Club**

Installation of new Reception in the Tennis Centre, together with automatic doors and CCTV.

Works to refurbish the toilets, to the standard of the recently refurbished changing rooms, are being carried out during the Spring.

- **Wellsprings Leisure Centre**

Redecoration of front-of-house areas was carried out over the Christmas period.

- **Wellington Sports Centre**

Redecoration of the Health Suite was carried out over the Christmas period.

- **Investors in People**

During November Tone Leisure underwent re-assessment against the Investors in People standards. The Assessor confirmed that the standards are being fully met, with a number of areas of particular strength including innovation, reward and recognition, communication and managing change.

- **Inclusive Fitness Initiative**

Wellsprings, Blackbrook and Wellington will soon start the accreditation process to gain this award. Additional Inclusive Fitness training will be available to all gym members of staff. The award looks at how we offer our fitness facilities to ensure that access is available to all people. Funding in kind to the value of £8,500 per site will support this process from the Inclusive Fitness initiative.

- **“Wiggle and Giggle with ME”** There’s a new studio class that is taking the fitness world by storm - it’s called “Wiggle and Giggle with ME”™, a pole dancing class that takes place in unique, fun and friendly surroundings. A great workout that will challenge your aerobic fitness whilst improving your flexibility and body tone. Wiggle and Giggle launched to fantastic feedback at Wellsprings in January

- **Soroptimist Swimathon** - The annual Soroptimist Swimathon, hosted by St. James Street Baths, took place over the weekend of 3rd/4th February. The designated charities this year were: St. Margaret's Somerset Hospice, Hearing Dogs for the Deaf, Open Door, ESCAPE, Home-Start Taunton Deane and SURE.

### **Forthcoming Events**

- **Taunton Deane Aquathlon** - The third Taunton Deane Aquathlon, organised by Tone Leisure and Somerset RC Tri, takes place on Sunday, 25th February at Wellington Sports Centre. The race comprises a swim in Wellington Pool, followed by a run around the lanes and footpaths of Wellington. There are two distances, 500 m swim and 5k run, or 1,000 m swim and 10k run. We expect an entry of around 130 people ranging from the Youth category aged 15 years, up to Vintage Vet aged 60+ years.
- **“Get In and Swim”** - Taunton Pool is inviting local people to sign up for a healthy New Year challenge to support Marie Curie Cancer Care in the local area and register for Swimathon 2007 “Get In and Swim” to take on the challenge of a hearty 5k swim at the event (22nd-25th March).
- **Taunton Triathlon** - Taunton based Solicitors, Foot Anstey, are this year's sponsors of the Taunton Deane Foot Anstey Triathlon on Sunday, 20th May, which is being organised by Tone Leisure and local triathlon club Somerset RC Tri. The event, now in its tenth year, is one of the most popular sporting events in the South West calendar and is already full, with all 400 places being taken in just two weeks. The event attracts complete beginners right through to the elite - drawing from sports clubs across the South West region and beyond. We will work closely with Foot Anstey to help make this anniversary event a success. Competitors will benefit from improved support facilities whilst spectators will enjoy a great day out with plenty of side attractions at Wellington Sports Centre to keep the whole family busy.
- **Meatloaf Trilogy** - Wellsprings will be hosting Meatloaf Trilogy on 3rd March.
- **The Counterfeit Stones** - The Counterfeit Stones will be appearing at Wellsprings on 20th April.
- **Jethro** - Jethro will be back at Wellsprings for his third visit, by popular demand, on 28th April.

## **Sports and Health Development**

- **Somerset LAA** - The Somerset Local Area Agreement (LAA) has set a target for the number of adults that are to be regularly participating in physical activity over the next 3 years. Tone Leisure are working in partnership with Taunton Deane Borough Council to encourage more people in Taunton Deane to become more physically active, in order to contribute to this target. Building upon the success of the Sport Relief Mile Event that took place at Wellsprings Leisure Centre in July last year, Tone Leisure has chosen to use mass-participation events to make a significant impact on these targets. Several events have been selected as the “key events” that Tone Leisure will use to encourage large numbers of people to participate in physical activity. Marie-Curie Cancer Care Swimathon (22nd-25th March) is the first of these events.
- **Community Cardiac Rehabilitation Programme** - The Taunton Deane Phase III Community Cardiac Rehabilitation Programme held a celebration event at Wellsprings Leisure Centre in December. The Somerset PCT programme, that is run in partnership with Tone Leisure, has been operating for just over a year and has seen more than seventy people benefiting from the service. The event was well attended by programme graduates, Health Professionals associated with the programme delivery and Dr. Tom MacConnell, Lead Consultant Cardiologist.
- **Club and Coach Development** - Club and Coach Development workshops have been organised in the new year by Sports Development at Wellsprings Leisure Centre. Twenty sports coaches from across the county attended a Sports Coach UK Workshop last week called Equity in Your Coaching, looking at ensuring they are equitable in their coaching. There will be a similar course held in February for club volunteers, run by Running Sport, called A Club For All which also addresses similar equity issues. Both of these workshops are a requirement for all sports clubs wishing to obtain clubmark status with their governing body.
- **MEND**

This programme is being funded from the Well Being programme of the Big Lottery. The success of this bid will enable Tone Leisure to provide an effective obesity prevention and treatment programme for children and their parents across Taunton and Wellington for two years. This project is being run in partnership with MEND.
- **MIND**

Tone Leisure have submitted a bid to the MIND partnership, which has successfully passed through the first round of the Well Being Fund.

Councillor John Clark



## **COUNCIL MEETING 20 FEBRUARY 2007**

### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR GARNER HOUSING SERVICES**

The Council has continued to improve the energy efficiency of the privately owned housing stock in the Deane using a combination of Warmfront Grants, Warm and Well Grants and the cavity wall insulation Council Tax rebate scheme.

In the last year the Council has put £70,000 into the Warm and Well Scheme. This scheme is delivered by the Somerset and ex Avon local authorities and is designed to assist residents over the age of 70 who do not qualify for the Government's income related Warmfront Grant. Additional funding in the new financial year will allow the age threshold to be reduced to age 65.

The cavity wall scheme, funded in partnership with British Gas, has been highly successful with a total of 900 enquires and 520 installations carried out by the middle of January 2007. This is a highly cost effective scheme because the Council only provides a subsidy of £50 for each installation with British Gas providing a similar amount resulting in a £100 rebate taken off an existing discounted and highly competitive price.

The Council is now working in partnership with British Gas developing a new renewable energy Council Tax rebate initiative that will work in parallel with the existing cavity wall insulation scheme. This scheme, one of only 4 pilots in the Country, will be launched shortly using publicity leaflets included with the Council Tax bills. This scheme will give substantial Council tax rebates to residents; with no match funding from the Council and in addition successful applicants will also be able to apply for substantial government low carbon building grants. The Council has also developed an interest free renewable energy loan scheme with the Wessex Reinvestment Trust, which will be available on a strictly limited pilot basis to the first few applicants.

The Council has also been successful in securing £80,000 from British Gas for "fuel switching" in Council properties. This payment has been made because in recent years the Council has changed heating systems in some Council properties from a "dirty fuel", coal, oil or electricity to a "clean fuel", gas. This windfall funding will be used for new energy efficiency improvements in properties.

Notwithstanding the success outlined above, this Council will continue to pursue grant funding and other initiatives that will help save Taunton Deane residents money, as well as protecting both our environment and also vulnerable groups within our community.

Cllr Greg Garner

# **COUNCIL MEETING 20 FEBRUARY 2007**

## **Report of Councillor Terry Hall Corporate Resources**

### **PERSONNEL**

#### **STAFFING**

Melissa Norval from Somerset County Council has taken over from Rob North as Chief Personnel Officer for TDBC. This is on a secondment basis of 3 days a week up until the start of the ISiS contract. Additional support will also be provided as required from SCC for 1 day a week. Rob North will continue on 1 day a week to manage and lead the Job Evaluation Project.

#### **SICKNESS ABSENCE**

We are experiencing a reduction in short term absence levels but need to focus on the current long term absence cases and how these can be managed. We are also looking to heighten the awareness of absence with staff via more text in the introductory handbook for all new staff etc. We are holding a meeting with Occupational Health to improve timescales and communication here.

#### **SMOKING**

The new legislation regarding non- smoking comes into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 and the results of the staff survey on this have been distributed. We are planning to visit all external sites to check compliance and managers understanding. Smoking in company vehicles will no longer be permitted so this will also need to be managed and communicated. We are also looking into smoking arrangements at Deane House in terms of the smoking area. This is in line with the survey results.

#### **PAYROLL**

The payroll function moves over to SCC this month and considerable work has been undertaken in this area to allow this to happen. From February 12<sup>th</sup> all payroll enquiries should be directed to County, as we will no longer have payroll staff within the personnel team here. This will be communicated to all managers and staff. We will continue to use the Resource link system here for reporting reasons – in particular the sickness absence reports which we are now producing monthly for managers.

#### **PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT**

We continue to provide professional support to ISiS, Housing Stock options and the redundancies etc in this area as well as Waste Partnership activities.



We are also dealing with other restructures as well as a number of staffing matters that have also been raised.

## **CORPORATE SUPPORT**

Apart from being very involved in the ISiS evaluation process (from printing out of bids for all evaluators, acting as technical support and buddies, to bid and site evaluators), Corporate Support Services has undergone a significant restructure.

Facilities management has moved from Property Services to Corporate Support Services and we have taken the opportunity to look at the resources available and as a result have merged Facilities management with Corporate Administration under the operational management of Angela Eldridge. This has resulted in Gwyn Carter (and her post) being available to recreate the operational Customer Services Manager post. A number of benefits have already materialised from this restructure.

Under Angela's control, Facilities management have carried out the first fire evacuation for some years. This pulled up a number of issues and Angela is working on solutions to these issues currently.

The cleaning contract has been investigated thoroughly and, thanks to David Woodbury's timely intervention, a potential fire hazard has been overcome. We now have a formal agreement with the cleaners, which ensure quality and safety for everyone. Other areas for improvement are being discussed and will be rolled out over the coming months.

A new agreement for the provision of security in Deane House with the current security company starts Monday 12<sup>th</sup> February, which provides us with both cashable savings and more pro-active role for the security officers who will also incorporate a meet and greet role into their job.

The Customer Services team once again have a full-time manager looking after their needs and discussions are taking place on the direction we need to move in, in line with the Customer Access strategy. Simple changes have already been seen in reception (e.g., DDA accessible phones, day-light bulbs) and will continue over the next few weeks, which, we hope will have a positive effect on customers (e.g., new signage, more structure to leaflets and notice boards).

The Design and Print team have successfully been working on a number of corporate and service led projects. The Supervisor, retired at the end of December and we have taken the decision not to employ another supervisor, but are looking at employing a print room assistant to ensure we have adequate staff cover within the busy print team.

The restructure has freed up Claire's time to look at more strategic matters and she has been working with each operational manager to ensure corporate requirements are met.

## **“ISiS ” – (IMPROVING SERVICES IN SOMERSET)**

We are moving rapidly to the final stages of the evaluation process, which consists of meetings of the Plenary Panels to consider the results of the Segments Panels. This will be followed by a recommendation of a Preferred Bidder.

Presentations to the Deliverables and Quality and Price and Affordability Panels by external assessors of the bidders ICT and Property proposals have been given recently, these very important reports will be taken into account in reaching the final decision.

After appointing a Preferred Bidder. There will be a period of negotiations to draw up a contract, with hopefully a start date in July.

## **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

### **ELECTIONS**

Borough and Parish elections will be taking place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May this year. New legislation has been passed to enable the checking of signatures on postal voting statements (forms returned with the ballot paper by postal voters). In our area we have around 10300 postal voters. Work started in the first week of January collecting Personal Identifiers from all these people. The PI is a signature and date of birth. If people don't reply after this then their postal vote will be cancelled.

They can however reapply for a postal vote at a later date. These PIs will be scanned and held on a database. At election time statements that come back will be compared with the signature and date of birth of that person held on the database.

As part of a bid to encourage more people to vote at elections Craig Morse and other officers and Councillors manned a small exhibition for two days recently in the Old Market Centre in Taunton. Passers by were asked to make sure they are included on the Register of Electors and encouraged to exercise their vote at the local elections in May. This display will be repeated at ASDA supermarket.

As part of the policy of taking our Annual Council meeting (Mayor making) out into the community, arrangements are now in hand for the meeting in May. Subject, of course, to the Mayor elect being re-elected as a councillor, the Annual Council meeting this year will be held at Norton Manor Camp. 40 Commando Royal Marines are Freeman of the Borough and are very keen to welcome the Council and the public to their premises for this occasion.

Also on the civic front, the Council's twin town of Konigslutter will be making a civic visit to Taunton Deane from 25 - 30 March this year. The Friends of

Konigslutter have arranged a varied and interesting programme for their visit, which will be led by their directly elected, executive Burgermeister, Ottomar Lippelt. The Council will be hosting a civic reception for the visitors on 28 March.

It is understood that work will shortly begin on alterations and redecoration of the Old Municipal Buildings prior to the building being occupied by the County Council Registration Service. Therefore arrangements have been made for the various pictures, paintings and civic artefacts within the building to be expertly removed, and stored by the County Museum service. The opportunity will be taken to restore some of these artefacts, particularly some of the paintings before they are returned for future display.

## **PROCUREMENT**

Together with the County Council we have produced a Joint new Procurement Strategy that was presented to the Resources Review Panel recently. One of the principle outputs of the Strategy is to amalgamate our and SCC purchases to gain economies of scale and obtain greater value from our investments into procurement systems and expertise.

Procurement is included in the IsiS project and the joint strategy, which contains requirements for ethical and local suppliers, will be the starting point for discussions regarding procurement by the Joint Venture Company.

## **FINANCIAL SERVICES**

Financial Services have now completed the 2007/08 budget. Full Council will consider this formally at this meeting. The budget sets out the Council Tax and Housing Rents increase for 2007/08. The proposed increase in Council Tax is 2%, this means that a Band D property will pay the Council £128.05 per annum or £2.46 per week.

Housing Rents are constrained by limits set by central Government and they will be increasing by an average of 4.99%. Following the completion of this lengthy exercise, work is now starting on preparation for the closing of the 2006/07 annual accounts.

Finally the Unit has been heavily involved in the evaluation of the ISIS bids for both stage 1 and stage 2 and also the impact of the Avon & Somerset Police Authority joining the partnership

## **REVENUES**

Year-end is our key priority as it is our first year-end on the new IBS system. We've recently undertaken training in how to run the year-end processes. A test run will be conducted week commencing 12<sup>th</sup> February, with the live process scheduled for the week commencing 26 Feb 2007. The process will result in a certain amount of system downtime, which will impact detrimentally upon backloads. As yet we don't know how long the system will be down, but

we're trying to minimise the impact.

The NNDR system conversion took place on 4 Dec 2007 and went well. However, there are a number of minor issues, which we are sorting out.

Both Council Tax & NNDR collection rates have suffered due to the delays in the recovery process resulting from the system conversions. Recovery action has now recommenced in earnest for Council Tax & we will be issuing summonses shortly. Action will recommence for NNDR in the near future.

We currently have a backlog of approximately 4 weeks items of post. We've recently implemented new processes aimed at achieving our target of processing post within 2 weeks of receipt.

Revenues staff are currently checking and amending their job evaluation questionnaires.

## **BENEFITS**

The Benefits Service cleared its backlog of work ahead of schedule and has now returned to its normal turn around of work (10 working days) following implementation of the IBS Open Revenues computer system.

Our processing times for new claims and changes of circumstances have reduced considerably. In January, the average time to process a new claim was 40 days (down from a high of 69 days in October) and the average time to process a change of circumstance was 15 days (down from 40 days in October). The percentage of new claims worked out within 14 days of receiving all the information we need from the claimant rose to 79% (up from 46% in August).

These times are still too high but I anticipate we will be close to re-achieving our previous top quartile results from the beginning of the new financial year.

**Both our Revenues and Benefits Staffs have been through a difficult period since switching off the old system back in the summer. I wish to record my gratitude to them all for the hard work they have put in since then.**

In October 2006 we successfully prosecuted 2 claimants for committing benefit fraud. In addition to this, we have issued 8 formal cautions since April 2006.

We are currently preparing for 'year end' and the mass re-calculation exercise for all our customers to take into account the increases in allowances and benefit rates from April.

In the booklet to be sent with all Council Tax bills in March, we have included a tear-off slip for residents to make a claim for Council Tax Benefit. A similar coupon was included with last year's Council Tax bills as part of a take up

campaign for Council Tax Benefit. In response to approximately 405 requests for more information, the team contacted customers to carry out initial checks. This allowed us an opportunity to prevent claims being made where it was clear there would be no entitlement and to explain to customers why they would not be eligible. In some instances we were able to provide advice and contact details for other benefits. Where there was the potential for customers to receive Council Tax Benefit, we offered either home or office based appointments to help customers complete claim forms and to ensure we had all the necessary information we needed. As a result we put 30 new claims into payment awarding extra Council Tax Benefit of £24,151 and an extra £6,818 in Housing Benefit

## **CORPORATE PROPERTY**

### **The OMB.**

Although building work is not due to start until April 2007, moving the existing tenants into temporary accommodation in East Reach and removing valuable artefacts into storage has already commenced. The building work, comprising a lift, archive storage and alteration to make the building comply with the Disability Discrimination Act is due to be completed by the end of August. The building will then be leased to the Somerset County Council primarily for use by the County Registrar.

### **Registration of Land**

The preparation of plans for the registration of part of the Councils land holdings is nearing completion. This project, led by the Council's Solicitor, takes advantage of a favourable financial offer by the Land Registry. The planned completion date for the Councils input is the end of March 2007 and it is likely that this date will be met.

### **Lights in Bath Place, Taunton.**

For many years it has been accepted that the lights in the three alleyways leading into Bath Place have needed improvement. The installation of new improved lighting has now commenced. It is anticipated that the work will be finished by the end of the month.

### **Solar powered lighting.**

The crematorium car parks require lighting. To provide mains fed lights would have meant digging up areas of the various car park and road surfaces. Because of advances in new technology with regard to solar power the opportunity has been taken to trial a solar powered light. Should it prove successful then a contract will be placed in the spring.

## **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Fiona Baker has now settled in to her post as web site marketing manager, and the web strategy group is now looking at ways to further develop the take up and usage of our site – which is currently averaging nearly 40,000 unique visitors per month.

Preliminary work on replacing the planning system has now commenced – the project board and project manager have been appointed from within the Planning and ICT units. Malcolm Kay will be project manager, and subject to formal approval from The Executive to proceed, the he will spend 3 days a week working full time on this project. A small re-organisation of roles within the ICT unit has taken place to accommodate this.

The additional bandwidth we installed on our home working internet connection late last year has largely resolved the performance issues we were experiencing as the number of staff using the facility grew.

Additionally, the wireless system installed at West Hatch as part of the Connecting Somerset project has vastly improved the broadband provision in that area, and one of our home workers based there is experiencing a far better service as a result.

The project to implement the new Academy system is reaching a critical phase as the data conversion work reaches the testing phase. At the same time, the project to implement the shared Choice Based Lettings system across all Somerset Districts is now starting to take significant resources from the ICT unit as important decisions are being made on the way the system will be implemented and linked to other existing council computer systems.

The ongoing project to fully implement the Customer Services system continues – we are currently in discussion with the software supplier over the best way to upgrade the system to their current software release without causing major disruption to the service during the upgrade.

All the performance indicators measuring system availability are above our targets, which are excellent news and reflect well on the skills of the ICT support teams. I congratulate them.

**Terry Hall**

## **Council Meeting 20 February 2007**

### **Report of Councillor Gwyneth Leighton - Communications**

#### **Public Relations**

We are currently working on developing a communications strategy for the ISiS programme which will take us from the announcement of the preferred bidder to contract close and through to transition. We will continue to produce the Members Briefing and monthly Newsletter.

The spring issue of Deane Dispatch has been put together and will be distributed during the last week of February and through March.

In December we handled 17 media inquiries and sent out 9 press releases and in January we had 40 inquiries and sent out 12 press releases.

We will soon be arranging a Member briefing about Waterlinks and now that a Public Engagement Officer (PEO) is in post we hope to start working with them to promote projects locally. The PEO will also look at the wider promotion both in terms of working with the partners as well as national promotion.

#### **Web Content and Marketing**

New web pages have been added to the Council website for our 'Team Somerset' bid which outlines why we believe this is the right choice for Somerset and explains the reasons why we have opposed to the County Council's bid for a single Unitary Authority.  
<http://www.tauntondeane.gov.uk/tdbcsites/council/press/teamsomerset.asp>

We have worked in partnership with Sedgemoor, South Somerset, West Somerset and Mendip District Councils to develop this bid and want to make sure that as many people as possible have access to as much information as possible about the efficiencies we can achieve by working in partnership and how this would avoid the unnecessary waste of money that would be needed to set up a unitary system and the loss of local representation for the public that would result.

We have also reviewed the 'How to become a councillor' web pages. These are due to be launched shortly and will give a clearer picture to the public on how to get involved and what is involved in being a councillor. We hope too, that it these changes will make it easier for the public to find the information on our website. We are also making revisions and improvements to the Homepage and these are due to be completed by the end of February, early March.

Staff involved in developing the website attended a conference/workshop on web strategy which was extremely helpful and provided insight into what other authorities are working on with their websites. This highlighted that not many authorities have web strategies written but many are now working on them.

We had a useful discussion at the Resources Review panel about how we can harness involving Internet technologies to provide better support for our Councillors. We will be feeding back to Councillors in due course.

Communications are currently working on an internal 'Writing for the Web' training course for staff members who actually have to write, edit and add detail to the website to give them the skills and support to carry out this vital role.

### **Consultation**

I am pleased to report that our new Consultation and Information Officer, Charissa deZeeuw, has now started. Previously she worked at the University of the West Of England and has been completing her PhD on Public Participation. She has been involved in public consultation associated with regeneration projects in London and brings with her many skills to strengthen our work in this field.

The aims of the Consultation and Information Officer are to ensure high standards in consultation and research activities across the Council. We want to make sure that all consultation follows best practice and will stand up to scrutiny. We see this role as key as key to delivering many of the aspirations in the government's White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" in terms of community engagement and participation in local decision-making. We will be continuing our overview of consultation and strengthening the implementation of the feedback we receive, and will also be maintaining a strategic overview of corporate complaints.

**Gwyneth Leighton**  
**Executive Councillor Communications**