

Dunster Panel

Notes of Meeting held on 23 April 2012

at the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Williton

Present

Marilyn Crothers (Chairman); Faye Barringer-Capp (Carhampton Parish Council); Bidy Bale, Chris Oliver, Paul Toogood (Dunster Parish Council); Ron Buckingham (Elworthy Parish Council); A Sparling (Luxborough Parish Council); Dave Walker (Skilgate Parish Meeting); J A Humber (Withycombe Parish Council); PC Bruce Strachan (Avon & Somerset Constabulary); Doug Hayhoe (Devon & Somerset Fire Service); Stephanie Oliver (ENPA); David Peake (SCC Highways); Alex Chick, Keith Turner, Bruce Lang (WSC); Christine Lawrence (SCC)

1. **“Have Your Say” – Community Issues**

Dave Walker, Vice-Chairman of Skilgate Parish Meeting, made reference to the changes to the planning regime emerging from the Localism Act 2011 and asked what impact it would have on the planning process in West Somerset.

Bruce Lang responded saying that the Council was still assessing precisely what the changes would mean, noting that there would be more emphasis placed on neighbourhood plans to enable local communities to have a bigger say in what development happens in their local communities.

Bruce confirmed that as soon as more information became available it would be communicated to parish and town councils, and the local community generally.

A letter was read received from Councillor Margaret Smith of Old Cleeve Parish Council expressing her concern at cutbacks in grass cutting which she felt was very important, particularly for visitors to West Somerset, to see public areas of land well maintained.

There were differing views from members of the Panel as to how important/desirable it was to have public open areas regularly maintained, with some feeling that money could be better spent elsewhere and others agreeing with Councillor Smith.

David Peake of Somerset County Council and Bruce Lang of West Somerset Council both confirmed that their respective authorities were still working together where possible to maximise the limited resources in connection with grounds maintenance. The Somerset County Council priorities would relate to highway safety matters including ensuring that directional signs were visible and meeting statutory requirements such as dealing with noxious weeds.

Councillor Smith then stated in her letter that, in her view, the West Somerset Council and Somerset County Council should be more proactive in responding to letters written about them in the West Somerset Free Press.

During the subsequent discussion it was recognised that whilst, in some instances, it was helpful for local authorities and/or individual councillors to respond to letters in the local media, careful judgement was needed as responses can sometimes provoke further letters/comments in an unhelpful way. In addition, the final say as to what actually gets published lies with the editor of a newspaper so there is no guarantee that responses will be published.

Councillor Jean Humber of Withycombe Parish Council noted that the local MP had again sent his apologies and asked that as and when the MP confirmed that he could attend a Dunster Panel meeting, could she please be advised.

June Henson

County Councillor Christine Lawrence advised, with sadness, that June Henson had recently passed away. June had been a Luxborough parish councillor for many years and had attended the Panel since its inception. Members of the Panel paid tribute to June's work and all agreed that she would be sadly missed.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Phil Gannon, Margaret Smith and Pamela Scragg (Old Cleeve Parish Council); Ian Liddell-Grainger MP; Inspector L Simpson (Avon & Somerset Constabulary); and Tim Taylor (WSC).

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 January 2012 and Matters Arising

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 January 2012 were agreed.

In regard to the issue relating to the problems experienced at Roadwater relating to works carried out by Wessex Water, Bruce Lang read out a response from Mike Bryant of Wessex Water making his apologies for the disruption caused in Roadwater and giving his assurance that this was a one-off event. He stated that Wessex Water always reviewed and maintained a public relations plan for water renovation schemes and assured the Panel that the organisation had internal reviews and lessons had been learnt to ensure that such an experience would not happen again.

Bruce Lang confirmed that the bus stop provided by Morrisons as part of the planning conditions for its new store in Minehead was to be maintained by Morrisons as it was situated on its land.

4. Police Report

PC Bruce Strachan presented the report in the absence of Inspector Simpson who had apologised for not being able to attend.

PC Strachan confirmed that there had been 108 reportable offences with non-domestic burglaries still being a major problem. The current trend of reportable crimes had been static. He encouraged everyone to warn neighbours and residents of the current spate of non-dwelling burglaries and, where possible, ensure that their property was protected.

Overall the local detection rate was just under 40% of the crimes committed which was a relatively high rate compared to other force areas although there was no room for complacency.

The other issue which he wished the public to be highly aware of was the thefts from motor vehicles particularly those parked in beauty spots in West Somerset.

5. Highways Report

David Peake reported on the current and proposed works being undertaken in the Panel area – as set out in the attached Appendix.

David then answered a range of questions from members of the Panel relating to various highway issues.

David also circulated a route plan of the Olympic Torch Relay that would be passing through West Somerset on 21 May 2012.

6. Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

Doug Hayhoe reported that the main issue of concern currently to the Fire Service was an increase in chimney fires that had resulted from a drop in temperature for the time of year which had caused many people to reuse their fires in their homes.

7. West Somerset Council Report

Bruce Lang reported that West Somerset Council had successfully achieved significant savings over the previous two years whilst maintaining the majority of its service provision to the local community.

Due to the current, and increasingly challenging, position relating to local government financing however further cuts were going to need to be made. The best present estimate was that a further £1.3 million worth of savings would be needed over the next four years and unless significant extra income could be achieved this would inevitably result in severe cuts in services.

One option that the Council may need to consider is holding a referendum in May 2013 to enable a relatively high percentage council tax increase to ensure that service levels were maintained at a reasonable level. There would obviously be a relatively high risk that the referendum would not be successful and the Council would therefore also have to agree an alternative budget that would need to be implemented should a no vote result in the referendum.

The situation was serious and could potentially impact on the long-term future of democracy in West Somerset.

There was an on-going review of local government finance and members and officers at West Somerset Council were exploring all avenues to try and secure the long-term financial viability of the Council.

8. Dates of Future Meetings

23 July 2012 at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Williton
15 October 2012 at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Williton
28 January 2013 at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Williton
15 April 2013 at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Williton

The meeting closed at 8.40 pm.