

At a meeting of the Taunton Deane Borough Council held in the Principal Committee Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday 17 December 2002 at 6.30 pm.

Present: The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey)  
The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Govier)  
Councillors Mrs Angus, Bishop, Mrs Bradley, Bulgin, Cavill, Mrs Cooper, Croad, Cudlipp, Debenham, Denington, Eckhart, Escott, Floyd, Guerrier, Hall, Henley, Mrs Hill, Horsley, House, Lee, Lees, Mrs Lewin-Harris, Mrs Lippiatt, Lisgo, Meikle, Mullins, Murphy, R Parrish, Mrs Parrish, Partington, Paul, Phelps, Miss Phippen, Slattery, Stone, Vail, Watson, Mrs Whitmarsh and Williams.

(The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey, welcomed Councillor Mrs Cooper to her first Council meeting.)

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 15 October 2002, a copy having been sent to each Member were signed by the Mayor.

2. Apologies

Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Mrs Biscoe, Bone, Dawson, Edwards, Farbus, Gill, Hunt, Mrs Miller, Tolchard, Tremethick and Warren.

3. Tree Warden Scheme

The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey) reported that the Council had received an award from The Tree Council to honour ten years commitment to the National Grid Tree Warden Scheme. A plaque received from The Tree Council was presented to Pam Motum, Tree Management Officer.

4. Campaign for Dark Skies

The Mayor (Councillor Prior-Sankey) accepted an award on behalf of the Council from Mrs J Griffiths of the British Astronomical Association's Campaign for Dark Skies. The "Good Lighting Award" was made to the Council for the work that it had done with Taunton Rugby Club on the provision of floodlights at its new ground.

5. Taunton Chamber of Commerce

Councillor Horsley presented a plaque which signified the Council's membership of the Taunton Chamber of Commerce. Membership was an indication of the Council's commitment to working with the private sector and other partners.

(Councillor Cavill arrived at the meeting at 6.43 pm.)

6. Recommendations to Council

(a) Council Tax Base 2003/04

The Council Tax Base was the Band 'D' equivalent of the properties included in the Valuation Officer's Banding List as at 16 October 2002 as adjusted for voids, appeals, new properties, etc and the provision for non collection.

The Band 'D' equivalent was arrived at by taking the laid down proportion of each Band as compared to Band 'D' and aggregating the total. The approved base had to be notified to the County Council, the Police Authority and to each of the Parishes.

Adjustments had also been included for new dwellings and for initial void exemptions for empty properties. The Council Tax Base also had to reflect the provision for losses on collection. In the current year, a collection rate of 98.5% was agreed, however, improved recovery rates indicated that this could be increased to 99% for 2004/04. The Council Tax Base for 2002/03 was 37,317.82 and the recommended base for 2003/04 of 38,122.79 represented an increase of 804,97 or 2.15%.

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that:

- (i) the report of the Corporate Finance Manager for the calculation of Council Tax Base for the whole and parts of the area for 2003/04 be approved;
- (ii) that pursuant to the Corporate Finance Manager's Report and in accordance with the Local Authority (Calculation of Tax Base) Regulations 1992 the amount calculated by Taunton Deane Borough Council as its tax base for the whole area for the year 2003/04 shall be 38,122.79 and for the parts of the area listed below shall for 2003/04 be:

Ash Priors	64.49
Ashbrittle	80.93
Bathealton	80.14
Bishops Hull	1,060.29
Bishops Lydeard/Cothelstone	1,747.68
Bradford on Tone	270.96
Burrowbridge	196.94
Cheddon Fitzpaine	617.85
Chipstable	109.92
Churchstanton	296.10
Combe Florey	107.55
Comeytrowe	2,066.07
Corfe	130.85
Creech St Michael	939.06
Durston	56.75
Fitzhead	120.74

Halse	140.43
Hatch Beauchamp	241.44
Kingston St Mary	426.88
Langford Budville	211.37
Lydeard St Lawrence/Tolland	195.55
Milverton	565.70
Neroche	235.83
North Curry	694.52
Norton Fitzwarren	652.77
Nynehead	143.14
Oake	318.92
Otterford	160.35
Pitminster	435.55
Ruishton/Thornfalcon	602.68
Sampford Arundel	128.16
Staplegrave	707.17
Stawley	112.47
Stoke St Gregory	369.72
Stoke St Mary	193.02
Taunton	15,141.11
Trull	931.31
Wellington	4,501.70
Wellington (Without)	288.83
West Bagborough	155.29
West Buckland	391.84
West Hatch	135.36
West Monkton	1,058.45
Wiveliscombe	1,036.98
<b>Total</b>	<b>38,122.79</b>

(b) Implementing the Vision for Taunton

In order to progress the Vision for Taunton it was necessary to engage consultants to work on an Urban Design Framework for Taunton. The draft brief would need to be agreed with the Council's partners and this Council would need to contribute £50k in the current financial year towards the cost of the consultants. This was an opportunity to continue our partnership with SWERDA and the County Council and to share the cost of this important, urgent work.

On the motion of Councillor Horsley it was RESOLVED that, a Supplementary Estimate of £50,000 be made in the current financial year towards the cost of engaging consultants for the Taunton town centre Urban Design Framework and masterplanning of the major sites.

(c) Leisure Trust Status

A joint meeting of Health and Leisure Panel and the Executive, held on 21 November 2003, had considered proposals regarding the formation of a Leisure Trust.

As part of the Sports and Pitches Best Value Review, the Council had commissioned the company, Strategic Leisure, to undertake a study to evaluate the alternative options for the management of the Sports and Leisure Service. The initial feasibility study received in January 2002 reached the following conclusions:

- (i) the current in-house service was providing an economic, effective and efficient service;
- (ii) the establishment of a Trust could provide a Best Value solution. The option could generate a tax based solution equivalent to around £250,000 per annum; and
- (iii) there would be no significant benefit in a private sector partnership due to the cost effectiveness of the current operation.

A more detailed study was commissioned as a consequence to consider the following:

- the need for capital investment given the condition of the facilities;
- the impact on the Council of any Trust;
- a draft business plan for the Trust;
- the scope of any externalisation;
- the form of Trust; and
- the needs of stakeholders.

This further study had now been undertaken and the meeting, to which all Councillors had been invited, received a presentation from Strategic Leisure on their findings and conclusions.

To maximise the financial benefits available and cause minimum disruption to the Council, the study recommended that a Trust should be established based initially on the leisure centres, Vivary Golf Course, development services and sports pitch bookings.

There were two options for forming a Trust. These were a company limited by guarantee or an industrial and provident society (IPS).

An IPS would be easier and quicker to establish, would be less heavily regulated and allowed for the involvement of employees. It could also be deemed an "exempt charity" enabling the Council to use its discretionary powers to grant mandatory tax relief. This would be very important in meeting the future capital needs of the service.

The essential capital maintenance programme over the next ten years was estimated at £2.38 million. If the current revenue position was sustainable, it was predicted that the tax and VAT advantages arising from the establishment of an IPS would amount to approximately £290,000 per year. Much of these revenue savings could be used to fund the capital requirements of the existing facilities.

Other financial implications were:

- (i) start-up costs of approximately £70,000 would need to be taken from year one savings;
- (ii) a contingency allowance of £25,000 should be set aside as initial working capital for the first two years;
- (iii) as there was to be no TUPE transfer of Central Support Staff, a phased "exit route" would need to be negotiated to allow the Trust to procure support services from the Council for a short period of time;
- (iv) the Trust would incur additional support costs of approximately £70,000 a year from year two onwards following the recruitment of a Finance Director and additional personnel support; and
- (v) the study assumed that the Head of Commercial Services post and her Personal Assistant would TUPE transfer as well as all of the existing staff directly employed by the Leisure DSO.

The formation of a Leisure Trust or IPS would have an impact on both Commercial Services and Community Services.

With the loss of the Head of Commercial Services and the entire Leisure DSO function, alternative management arrangements would need to be made for the DLO, Procurement and Cemeteries and Crematorium. The options available to the Council would need to be carefully considered and it was suggested that £23,000 be retained from the savings each year to finance these arrangements.

Although Community Services would be responsible for monitoring the Trust/Council partnership and for negotiating the annual grant settlement, it would also be responsible for strategically planning Leisure Services in the future, even though the professional advice such planning relied upon, would be transferred with the Leisure DSO staff.

To resolve this issue it was proposed that the remit of the Leisure Development Manager's post be widened to include sports issues and that a new post of Strategic Leisure Officer be created with £30,000 being retained from the savings each year to finance the post.

The Council would continue to:

- retain the assets;
- formulate the leases (typically 20 years) which could include break clauses;
- negotiate the annual grant with the Trust enabling it to ensure that the Trust delivered its corporate objectives;
- take up to three seats on a Board of 16 members; and
- retain the responsibility for the strategic direction of Leisure.

Adequate safeguards would need to be included within any leases negotiated to take account of any changes in the current tax relief position.

On the motion of Councillor Henley it was RESOLVED that:

- (i) a Leisure Trust be formed on the basis set out in the report to come into operation in October 2003;
  - (ii) alternative management arrangements for the residual Commercial Services functions be funded from the savings generated by the formation of the Trust;
  - (iii) a new post of Strategic Leisure Officer be created and be funded from the savings generated by the formation of the Trust;
  - (iv) the set-up costs of approximately £70,000 be taken from the year one savings;
  - (v) the working capital costs of £25,000 be taken from the year one and two savings;
  - (vi) all the residual savings generated by the formation of the Trust be ring fenced for reinvestment in the facilities managed by the Trust; and
  - (vii) adequate safeguards be included in any leases negotiated to protect the Council's interests in the event of the tax relief position changing in the future.
- (d) Corporate Child Protection Policy

The Executive had considered details of a proposed Corporate Child Protection Policy.

The protection of children and young people was integral to the Council's corporate values and underpinned the delivery of the Council's corporate priorities.

The Draft Policy had been prepared following investigation and research by an Officers' Working Group. It had also been considered in detail by the Community Leadership Review Panel at its meeting on 24 October 2002. The

Panel had recommended that the Policy be adopted. Details of the Policy had previously been circulated to all members.

On the motion of Councillor Lisgo it was RESOLVED that the Corporate Child Protection Policy be adopted.

7. Questions to and Reports of the Leader of the Council and Executive Councillors

(a) Leader of the Council (Councillor Horsley)

(i) Councillor Mrs Lewin-Harris asked the following question:

Following a report in the Taunton Times that the District Auditor's Due Diligence report into Wellsprings may not be made public, can I ask if this is correct? This report has been carried out in the public interest, paid for by Deane Council Tax payers, and I think that it is vital that this report does come into the public domain. If it does not, it will be seen as a whitewash, people will assume that there is something to hide and the Council will be accused of burying bad news. Can you reassure me that this report will be made public?

Please also could some indication be given as to when Members can expect to be given a formal briefing as to the likely completion costs of the centre and implications on our budget. The Contract was terminated in June and we are now in December, without any firm news as to costs or likely re-commencement of works.

Councillor Horsley replied:

I agree with Councillor Lewin-Harris that the report deserves to be in the public domain. I have always held that this is the most appropriate way for all local authorities to operate if at all possible and the Liberal Democrats have been in the vanguard of open government.

I promise her that if at all possible that we will publish it. My caveat is that whilst litigation is pending with the contractors Warners - and I will remind her that we are winning all that has come to the courts so far - we have to proceed cautiously and not in any way prejudice our prospects of success.

However, she will be one of the first people to see the report when it comes - probably in early January, but this has not been confirmed by the DA yet so no promises. She will then be able to conduct the enquiry in respect of the Health and Leisure Panel which she so ably chairs.

In response to the second part of her question I can confirm that we are giving detailed consideration to this as part of the budget process. The all party Wellsprings Panel is well aware of the situation and has got a mandate to undertake the necessary research on all matters. We will update the Council and bring proposals to the budget meeting in

February and if necessary call a special Council Meeting to discuss all relevant matters.

We have the funds available already to do any weathering of the building until such time as we get the go-ahead for the completion of the building. It is pleasing to report that the reparation of the work is likely to be a lot cheaper than earlier indications.

(ii) Councillor Williams asked the following question:

Please could we have clarification as to the actual position with the Central Government Revenue and Capital Finance Settlements as we are receiving confusing messages from the Leader and the Chief Executive. In the report to Council you refer to a 4.7% increase which you then say only results in a 2.1% increase for this Council. The Chief Executive, in what must have been a contemporaneously written report, refers to a 6.04% increase.

As this obviously results in a considerable difference to the funds available to us we would be grateful for confirmation as to the actual award made.

Also reference is made to finding out why other Somerset District Councils have appeared to receive far more generous settlements than ourselves. Is there anything further to report regarding these investigations?

Councillor Horsley replied:

The answer lies in the fact that the reports were not contemporaneous. You will have read my comments in the report. The Government have got the benefit of doubt as the Housing Benefit Grant for Administration has produced an extra £278K at this stage. This means that our cash settlement is 6.04% better than last time.

I should stress that these figures are not confirmed yet. There is a period of consultation and we are still unsure of the basis of how these figures have been arrived at. Similarly we are unable to explain the reasons for the much more generous settlements that both Sedgemoor and Mendip have received. We think it is very much to do with deprivation indices and perhaps sparsity.

We are still working through the meaning of this and all councillors will get in the Christmas stockings the first considerations of the impact on our likely budget for next year. This will be worthwhile reading for you all on Boxing Day and you will not doubt let the Executive and myself know your thoughts early in the New Year.

We have already taken some of our corporate priorities to focus groups in Taunton, Wellington and Wiveliscombe and had some interesting

responses. The outcome of these reports will be made available in late January.

- (iii) Councillor Williams asked the following questions:

At the Full Council meeting of 15 October it was reported that the report on the Creation of a Regional Agricultural Business Centre incorporating the Livestock Market would be available in six weeks or so. Nine weeks have now elapsed and I am not aware of when this report may be available. Please could we be advised when this report will be available to Members.

Also could we be reassured that as the report stage appears to be suffering delay that if necessary the lease for TMA will be extended beyond the original four years plus one year extension if required.

Councillor Horsley replied:

There is a meeting of the joint Sedgemoor/Taunton Deane panel on Thursday 19 December after which we should be in a position to say a lot more. In the meantime the answer I gave to John William on 15 October still appertains.

What I can say is that it appears that the cost of relocating the livestock market is escalating whichever site is chosen and that the funding gap is getting wider. This must make the financial viability of relocation to all parties less attractive. All options will have to be considered carefully and I promise the Full Council will have every opportunity to discuss this at length shortly.

It would be premature of me to respond to his second question about extension of the lease until matters have been clarified further about the likely venue and financial viability.

- (iv) Report of Councillor Horsley

The season of goodwill is upon us. I would first like to welcome Kim Cooper to her first meeting as the new representative for Creech and Ruishton. She will bring a new vigour and fresh approach to the council. Her victory was an endorsement of the ideas and policies of the ruling group coupled with her own personal message for the people of the ward.

#### Asylum Seekers

I am pleased that the response we are getting from the NASS (National Asylum Support Service – an arm of the Home Office) and Clearsprings is one of co-operation. I hope to be able to report to you verbally on a meeting likely to take place on 16 December.

I have written to the Home Secretary David Blunkett enquiring how the figure of 302 refugees was arrived at for Taunton. I have also asked him what research has been done into establishing the availability of housing within the private rented sector before they came here with their announcement of their intentions.

I repeat that we want to play our part in assisting these people. We want the best for all homeless people of whatever origin. Our problem lies in the fact that the private rented sector seems unable to cope with the waiting list that already exists here and the sheer scale of the allocation given to Clearsprings by the NASS will only exacerbate the situation. The funding comes from the Home Office but the knock on effect could be serious and costly especially if there is a danger of replacement of those already waiting with the incoming refugees.

### The Budget

It is difficult to understand at this stage the announcement of the figures for central government support for 2003/4. The headline figure is that there has been a 4.7% increase for us compared with 12% for Mendip, 9.4% for Sedgemoor and as little as 3.3% for South Somerset.

In cash terms this however comes down to only 2.1% for TDBC and could be yet another example of government "spin" to appear much more generous than they actually are. I have to give them the benefit of the doubt at this stage as the full figures have not been yet revealed to us. There is a hope that the change in Housing Benefit Administration grant which has been transferred to the Department of Work and Pensions might in fact be more generous and help us to overcome part of our Budget Gap of £411,000. I will endeavour to update the Council verbally on 17 December.

I do deprecate the fact the government released the early figures to the press some six hours before they came to Taunton Deane. It shows that they are much more interested in getting their own message across than helping local authorities to overcome the difficulties they face.

### Wellsprings Centre

We are making significant progress on this project. It does not appear from any visit to the site but behind the scenes things are much more optimistic.

Firstly the process for selecting a partner to submit the bid into Sport England is making good progress. Sport England have understandably informed us that they will only consider the cost of work to completion and expect us to pick up any remedial and rectification work that has to be done. This is approximately half the remaining work. We are still on target for the timetable we have jointly agreed between ourselves and the other partners Ladymead School and the County Council.

Secondly the funding package is slowly taking shape between the partners. Clearly this has to have the approval of full Council in due course but I am more sanguine than of late about this. Again I will endeavour to update colleagues on 17 December.

Thirdly it is pleasing to report that the attempts by Warners to seek adjudication in their favour in respect of costs have failed now on three separate occasions. Each time TDBC has come out well and Warners has in effect had to pick up the bill. This doesn't guarantee we will win always but it does augur well when we come to seek recompense for the rectification work that has to be done before completion.

We have not had to date the District Auditors "due diligence" report.

We owe it to the community to get the centre up and running and put behind us the disappointments of the past 15 months.

#### Vision for Taunton

We are already seeing the fruits of our work on this. We have to go forward with the approach "This is what we are doing – isn't it great!" rather than "Do you think this is a good idea?"

It is pleasing that the Reference Group has now been established by the Local Strategic Partnership. This will monitor progress as well as providing advice on all matters. What it does establish is a commitment to making Taunton a regional centre of excellence and capitalising on what we do best – namely serving the public in all aspects.

We will have to overcome the difficulties we are experiencing with infrastructure projects. We must seek to drive forward the ambitions to obtain a Strategic Employment site. The longer term work of the Urban Extension Study is critical to this ambition of ours.

I want to clear any ambiguity about this being "Taunton only". We can only deliver the Vision of Taunton as this regional centre of excellence if we enjoy the support of our colleagues in Wellington and the wider community – the diaspora of Taunton. Similarly we must acknowledge the significance of other towns who impact on our lives such as Bridgwater. The regional approach towards planning that is coming in will mean that we have to plan with the strategic objectives in mind for the wider community.

The Blue Paper on Urban Design Framework shows that we are not letting grass grow under our feet. In fact, in terms of long term visioning I believe we are positively sprinting!

### LGA Improvement Commitment

On behalf of the Council I have signed a document in support of the LGA's proposed commitment to working with its members to help Councils to secure continuous improvement in their services to local people. A copy of this document is circulated for the information of members.

#### (b) Housing Services (Report of Councillor Stone)

##### Securing Social Housing

“Social Housing ” – means subsidised social housing for rent.

It is unlikely that in the foreseeable future there will be a significant increase in the amount of Social Housing Grant available for Councils to allocate to Housing Associations to build new homes. The delivery of social housing locally needs to increase significantly to allow us to work towards our target of 131 dwellings per year (the figure established in the Couttie Housing Needs Report). Less than 50 social housing units will be provided next year.

In order to increase provision, the Government is recommending that Councils introduce Supplementary Planning Guidance to secure an increase in the developer's subsidy on sites allocated for housing. The objective is to secure social housing on planning sites at nil public subsidy. Council Social Housing Grants could then be used to fund other Housing Association schemes not tied in to private housing developments.

The Current System - Using an example property value of £100,000, the Housing Association currently raises approximately £40,000 in private borrowing paid for from rents and the remaining sums come from the Housing Corporation Social Housing Grant (SHG) £30,000 and Local Authority SHG of £30,000.

A Section 106 agreement is used when an application for private housing is submitted by a developer and the site is one hectare or over, or the scheme is for 25 units or more. If the site is a Local Plan allocation, the target % for social housing has already been set in the report agreed by the Executive in May 2002. The percentages vary from 20% - 35% depending on whether there are exceptional costs associated with a site's development. The terms of the Section 106 agreement are spelt out at the time of the application and the final wording is agreed between the Council, the developers and the Housing Association.

On windfall sites not identified in the Local Plan, the proportion of social housing will be determined on a site-by-site basis, generally within the range above.

The New Proposal for Providing Social Housing - Recent Strategic Planning and Housing Review Panels have recommended that the Council adopts an

additional policy to provide social housing. Under this new Supplementary Planning Guidance on Section 106 sites, the Housing Association would expect to pay the developer only 40% of the value of the social housing (the figure for this is set by the Housing Corporation and is known as the “total cost indicator” (TCI). The remaining 60% would be seen as a subsidy from the developer.

To achieve this the developer could give the land free to the Housing Association and bridge the gap between the cost of the land and the 60% by way of a financial contribution. Alternatively the developer could build the dwellings and sell them to the Housing Association at 40% of their TCI value. These dwellings would be built in accordance with Housing Corporation design standards.

This new arrangement would mean that no additional subsidy on these sites would need to be provided by the Council or the Housing Corporation.

#### New Social Housing in Cotford St. Luke

Redland Housing Association has completed 20 houses at Milsom Place. A planning application has been submitted for a further 20 dwellings at Manning Road. This will be an “Eco site”.

Knightstone Housing Association and SHAL Housing Limited are working together to provide 10 houses and flats, and 10 shared equity houses on the Village Centre site.

#### Energy Efficiency Strategy

A new Strategy to promote domestic energy efficiency is currently being created. It includes plans to develop financial incentives, grants, advice and promotion and involves many partners both within and outside of the Council. Some recent initiatives include an Energy Efficiency Week prize draw to win a fridge and kettles, plus two radio interviews on local stations at the start of Warm Homes Week to promote grants and advice available from the Energy Efficiency Officer.

There has also been an excellent response to the advert placed in the Taunton Times recently and many phone calls have been received from people requesting more information.

This winter’s Deane Warmth campaign is imminent and will again involve a partnership with a utility company. The grant will once again provide insulation measures to those vulnerable to cold and damp conditions.

#### New Housing

There were 74 completions at Cotford St. Luke between October 2001 and September 2002 with a further 250 still to come.

Sites with Planning Permission in Taunton will provide a further 430 completions, With 110 at the Rugby Club, 50 off Lisieux Way and 50 at Bishops Saab Garage.

In Wellington a further 130 dwellings, with 58 of these on the Tonedale site.

Although there are 1,300 committed dwellings in the system for the Borough it is fair to say that in Taunton the number of sites is 'drying up' pending the Local Plan sites coming through.

(c) Planning and Transportation (Councillor Bulgin)

(i) Councillor Williams asked the following question:

Please could we be advised what action is intended to overcome the self inflicted problems we are experiencing with the Station Road/Priory Bridge Road junction. I say self inflicted problems because the decision to sanction these alterations to the junction were taken in the full knowledge that they would cause even greater traffic congestion on an already congested junction.

As a result we have imposed unacceptable delays to traffic by the congestion caused which economically is a disaster and totally unacceptable in terms of the extra pollution caused. This is said with the background that only last week we had to make orders for air quality management in two areas of Taunton Deane with other areas nearing prescribed limits.

We need positive action to reinstate two lane traffic as existed to improve the situation, not just tweaking the traffic light sequence and timing.

Councillor Bulgin replied:

The traffic signals at Priory Bridge Road came into operation on 23 August but because of technical problems were not linked up to the computer that controls Taunton's traffic signals, the SCOOT system, until 11 November. On that date the set of four traffic signal junctions, Priory Bridge Road at Station Road, Priory Bridge Road at Safeway, Station Road at Staplegrove Road and Bridge Street at Wood Street all became linked together as a single SCOOT 'region', allowing traffic throughout to be measured and managed, minimising delays on all arms of these junctions.

Whilst there are considerable delays on both Priory Bridge Road and Station Road between August and November, which undoubtedly caused frustration and anger to motorists and local traders alike, the technical problems were largely outside the control of the Highway Authority who made every effort to rectify the situation as quickly as possible. The inconvenience caused during this period is regretted.

However, the situation has been monitored regularly over the last few weeks and with the improvements that came on line in November the road network in this area is now working well with delays very little changed from before the junction of Priory Bridge Road was altered. This is being achieved with almost exactly the same throughput of vehicles on Station Road as before the junction was altered but with the addition of a safe crossing facility to allow pedestrians to gain access to this important shopping area.

At this time of year, on the run up to Christmas, when car parks are often full early in the day, not only on Saturdays but most days of the week, the whole of the Taunton road network is under considerable strain. Often long delays are occurring, sometime away from the traditional peak periods. Queues form around north Taunton at peak times at various points on the road network, but are often totally unconnected with the Priory Bridge Road junction with Station Road, although this junction is frequently cited as being the problem in every case.

Somerset County Council has no plans to make any further alterations to this junction and has no budget provision for additional works this year. In line with normal practice the County Council will continue to monitor the situation and, in partnership with the Borough Council, will shortly be starting a review of Taunton Transport Strategy and the issues at Station Road and other congested parts of the network will be addressed through this process.

Councillor Williams responded with a supplementary point. He did not agree that it was just the festive season causing problems. Two lanes should be reinstated.

(ii) Report of Councillor Bulgin

I have been considering how best to achieve an inflation-only increase in the total income from car parking charges. Converting this into actual coinage within the tariff structure is not easy.

I have therefore decided to advertise proposals immediately after Christmas to increase the charges in the medium stay (Shopper 2) car parks by 10p per hour. This will bring in an estimated additional £47,000 in a full year and will affect the Belvedere Road, Castle Street, Duke Street, Elms Parade, Greenbrook Terrace and Wood Street Car Parks.

Charges in the central short-term car parks and the commuter car parks will not be increased.

The comments made by several Members about the apparent under-usage of the top floors of the Old Market Shoppers Multi-Storey Car

Park, as well as the recommendations which came from the Review Panel following their recent deliberations, have also been taken on board.

This car park's present designation of Shopper 1 reflects its most central location. I do however agree that we cannot be seen to have such an asset not being fully used and am grateful to those who have provided graphic evidence to back up their arguments. I believe that we should encourage some longer stay usage, whilst protecting the shopper and visitor customers.

To achieve this, I am proposing that the top two floors be made a minimum stay of 4 hours and that the charging structure lies between the Shopper 1 and Shopper 2 rates. This will give an all day charge of £3 instead of the present £4.

Moving on from parking matters, we will be carrying out a preliminary consultation with Monkton Heathfield residents during the first quarter of 2003. This will be purely exploratory to find out from the local people what they want to see in the Development Guide for Monkton Heathfield.

Finally, I am pleased to report that a brief for consultants for the Taunton Urban Design Framework (UDF) is being prepared. The UDF will build on the existing Local Plan Policies to provide Supplementary Planning Guidance for the development of the centre of Taunton. Such guidance will reflect the aspirations of the Vision and will allow Taunton to fulfil its role as a Principal Urban Area.

(d) Economic Development, Property and Tourism (Report of Councillor Croad)

You will recall that when this Council submitted our first Asset Management Plan last year, it was assessed as being 'poor' largely due to the fact that our properties condition had not been evaluated.

I am pleased to be able to report that this year our Plan has been placed in the 'good' category, which means that future demands on us are likely to be less onerous. In addition, we should receive the sum of £50,000 which I hope can be ring-fenced for future maintenance programmes.

Although we will not be required to make detailed annual submissions, we will still need to demonstrate we are managing our assets well and doubtless the CPA judgement will be influenced by its effectiveness.

The condition of our stock is relatively satisfactory but we must ensure that it does not deteriorate and that the existing categories are maintained. We have to take some hard decisions on those assets which are in the lowest category. We either improve them or dispose of them.

I have asked our officers to come up with some imaginative proposals which may attract the interest of the RDA or County Council.

An up to date Property Asset List is now available for Members on request.

I made reference in my last report to the Urban Design Framework and the master plans for the key areas. We have met with senior members of the SWRDA and they have urged us to move ahead with the minimum of delay. These are the important first steps to implementing the vision.

### Tourism

I am most sorry to see Katie Burton, our Tourism Officer, move on to pastures new, but I know you will join me in wishing her well in Cumbria. It will be hard to match her enthusiasm and energy but I am determined that we will maintain the current momentum, particularly in the important areas of Equine and Cycling Tourism, together with the many other initiatives she has been driving forward.

I had the pleasure of addressing “The Way Forward for Tourism in Somerset” meeting held recently at Cricket St Thomas. Local Authorities in Somerset, the RDA and South West Tourism were well represented along with key operators in the County’s tourist industry. The Interim Steering Group reported on the progress made in developing a Tourist Strategy for Somerset. This Group will continue their work and by next April will come up with recommendation for a structure, a detailed strategy, culminating in a business plan. If Somerset is to receive the funding it needs, for example, to exploit the benefits of E Tourism, we must demonstrate it has clear and effective policies and the right structure to deliver a service that is anything approaching world class.

(e) Leisure (Councillor Henley)

(i) Councillor Mrs Lewin-Harris asked the following question:

Can Councillor Henley please tell the Council whether the proposed extension to the Tennis Centre at Blackbrook is on or off?

May I remind Council of the sequence of events.

In July this year, Councillor Henley brought to full Council with absolutely no prior consultation, a proposal to commit £75,000 this year and £150,000 next year to partially fund an extension to Blackbrook Tennis Centre. At least those were the figures given to members in the papers sent out with the Council summons. On the evening of the Council meeting, another piece of paper was produced saying that the sum needed was £318,275, all in this financial year and a supplementary estimate for that sum from General Fund Reserves was pushed through.

Conservatives did not support this Supplementary Estimate because:

- (a) There had been no consultation
- (b) There was not justification for the figures and we had no faith in the back-of-the-envelope accounting that seemed to be going on
- (c) We had grave doubts as to whether the Council could afford this sum, given the problems with Wellsprings.

On 24 October the following decision was announced in the Weekly Bulletin:

*Following discussion by Executive Members at the Executive Agenda Setting meeting on 14 October, Councillor Henley has agreed that due to the uncertainty of the funding position with the Wellsprings Centre, the £318,000 allocated in the Capital Budget to the Indoor Tennis Centre be withdrawn.*

Conservatives questioned whether Councillor Henley had the power to make alterations to the Capital Budget in this way, and consequently the following appeared in the Weekly Bulletin on 21 November:

*It has been pointed out that in the 25 October Weekly Bulletin the decision relating to the proposed expansion of the Tennis Centre needs to be corrected. The item wrongly implied that in addition to our withdrawal of our application for LTA funding, a variation to the approved capital programme has also been made by withdrawing the allocation of £318k. This is not so. Any significant changes to the capital programme such as this can only be made by full Council. Until Council approval is given, therefore, this allocation remains in the programme as approved at the full Council meeting of 23 July.*

So, could I ask that the situation be clarified? We expected this item to be on the Council Agenda but it is not. Therefore it seems that £318,000 for the extension of the Blackbrook Tennis Centre is still in the Council's capital programme? Is it therefore proposed that the scheme to expand the tennis centre should go ahead?

Councillor Henley replied:

The £318k allocated to the tennis centre is still technically shown as such in the existing Capital Programme. The decision Council took in October was that we should not proceed with an application to the Lottery/LTA. This was taken on the emerging information on the likely costs of the Wellsprings Centre. Having received this information it seemed wise and prudent that we did not at that stage proceed with the application for a tennis centre extension. Things might change and the tennis project will be kept under review.

The Capital Programme has not been amended yet as we do not know what the amendments are likely to be. We know we have not proceeded with the tennis project, but it is not 100% clear what we

want to do with the money yet. It is likely that it will be used on the Wellsprings project, but until we know the final costs of this it is difficult to make any formal changes to the Council's programme. The entire programme will be represented to Members during the budget setting process for comment and of course will be subject to full Council approval in February.

- (ii) Councillor Mrs Bradley asked the following question:

May I refer Councillor Henley the Portfolio holder for Leisure, Arts and Culture to The Vision for Taunton and the Landsdown Partnership feasibility study on Hunt's Court as Centre for Visual Arts, and receive his assurance that he will be representing Taunton Deane at the Somerset County Council Executive Meeting tomorrow to argue for a deferral of the decision to sell.

Councillor Henley replied that representation had already been made to the Leader of Somerset County Council jointly by the Chair of the Health and Leisure Review Panel (Councillor Mrs Lewin-Harris) and the Leader of the Council (Councillor Horsley). The County Council was therefore already aware of this Council's views.

- (iii) Report of Councillor Henley

Since the last full Council meeting the decision to proceed our Leisure Service towards a Leisure Trust was supported by a joint meeting of the Health and Leisure Review Panel and the Executive. The opportunity to ensure funding for essential improvements to our leisure facilities will of course be further debated at this Council meeting.

At the moment our Parks Strategy is on going and we will be applying for Green Flag status for Wellington Park. The issue of the future of the Wellington Skateboard Park and the ski slope were discussed at last week's Review Panel.

Taunton Deane has been supporting a season of rural cinema events where we have sponsored the showing of recent cinema releases in local rural village halls.

The current re-wiring work continues apace at Wellington Sports Centre. This will however, mean, for safety reasons, a two week closure from 14 December until 28 December to complete the necessary works.

The GP referral programme, now recognised as the most successful scheme in Somerset, has already hit its target this year in less than 9 months and the golf referral programme has regular participants. A recent agreement has been made with Exeter City Football Club who will create links and association with all our junior football

programmes. This will greatly increase the prestige of our junior football sessions.

(f) Communications (Report of Councillor Lees)

In my second report as the member with responsibility for Communications I am able to report success in our work for early and positive publicity and progress on our Communications objectives. You will remember that my role is to co-ordinate and review:

public relations,  
media relations and  
communications.

In the last two months we have faced, as usual media pressures for information on a number of major schemes, the latest of which is the proposal by Clearsprings Management Ltd that refugees are brought to Taunton to await determination of the application for asylum. This one in particular was quickly placed in the public arena, to inform and to remove uncertainty as far as we can.

To them all we have responded quickly and accurately and members have played their part in keeping themselves well briefed and available for immediate comment – we know that good communication is essential to good local government.

Of the items I brought you last time, the Communications Strategy is continuing to be developed alongside the Council's bid for Investors in People and also with some additional support from the Community Services Directorate, an example of cross-corporate working.

Our Council newspaper the Deane Dispatch is published this month, delivered with the free newspaper 'The Star' to urban areas and direct to every rural household by post. We will be pleased to hear in the New Year of any gaps in delivery – not that we believe there are too many!

The Deane Dispatch is a major vehicle for Council news and explanation in a way that is most likely to be considered by householders, directly to their home. The front page story gives space to our Budget consultation and details the pressures on this authority to do much, with not enough.

Please encourage your residents to respond, every slip returned will be read and will weigh in our Budget deliberations.

Finally on 20 November I was able to welcome delegates to a one day Seminar organised by the South West Access Forum. It was aimed at Architects and Surveyors and with Ed Norton from our Building Control was a valued speaker, informing professionals on access for all.

In the New Year I will be looking to gather information about access for all within the Borough of Taunton Deane especially as 2003 is to be European Year for the Disabled.

(g) Community Leadership (Report of Councillor Lisgo)

Community Safety

Taunton Deane Crime and Disorder Partnership is on course to spend funds allocated for reducing crime and disorder across the area. Projects include "Night Hoops" - late night basketball activity for young people in the Priorswood, Halcon and Wellington areas. Another innovation is a "drug detection" dog which is specially trained to assist the police in tracking down drug related crime in pubs, clubs and public places throughout Taunton Deane.

In addition to the successful parish warden scheme, we have now established Neighbourhood Wardens which have been operating in Taunton North and East since June 2002. Taunton Deane has been chosen by the Home Office to participate in a national pilot of such schemes and we have recently taken part in an evaluation exercise for this purpose.

Youth Matters

A Child Protection Policy is being considered by Full Council tonight. This is a national first for a District Council and covers all aspects of the Council's dealings with young people - for example, as a housing and leisure provider.

The youth magazine Voice 24-7 is now in its eighth issue and continues to involve a growing number of young people in its production and development.

Training for Councillors on youth matters has been delivered - a stimulating and challenging experience for your people and members alike! The training attracted national profile and is planned to take place again next year.

Community Strategy

A community strategy for Wiveliscombe and West Deane area is nearing the end of development. There has been huge local involvement in the exercise, with thousands of people from across the West Deane area giving their views at numerous events that have taken place over the past year. The community strategy will act as a blueprint to guide the future of the area in the longer term.

The Taunton community strategy will link closely with the recent exercise to develop a vision for Taunton and will focus largely on the implementation of the vision.

A great deal of effort has been put in to creating a bid to the RDA via the Somerset Strategic Partnership to support regeneration in Lyngford. I would like to record my thanks to officers for all their efforts on this front in recent weeks.

### Race Equality Scheme

This scheme is another piece of work which has been recently developed and also highlighted as an example of national best practice by the Housing Quality network.

## (h) Environmental Services (Report of Councillor Mullins)

### Environmental Protection Team

- The public consultation phase for the declaration of two discrete Air Quality Management Areas at East Reach and Henlade is now complete. The way is now clear formally to declare these areas which will be done in the form of an Order, as required by legislation. We are in close consultation with Somerset County Council's Economy, Transport and Environment Department to develop an Action Plan to reduce levels of Nitrogen Dioxide in these areas.
- The annual programme for the routine sampling of private water supplies which was severely disrupted by the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, is now back on track as a result of a successful 'catch up' programme.
- Progress is on schedule to identify and prioritise potential land contamination sites across the Borough. The legislation requires a more detailed examination of all high risk sites by the end of 2003 and we are on target to achieve this.
- Work has commenced to provide the long awaited first time rural sewerage scheme in the Blagdon Hill and Pitminster areas and is scheduled for completion in January 2003.

### Housing Standards Team

- The Team participated in a recent successful Landlords' Forum at which copies of the new 120 page TDBC Landlords' Guide to HMOs was distributed. The Guide will be made available free of charge to all HMO Landlords.
- A recently commissioned HMO Survey has revealed the existence of 12 previously unknown HMOs within the Borough, which have now been prioritised and added to the Inspection Programme.
- Following the announcement that some 300 Asylum Seekers are to come to TDBC, work has commenced to identify and address the many Housing Standards issues involved.

### Recycling

- We have just received news that the SWP in partnership with Avon FoE have been successful in winning £370k of DEFRA funding to provide a collection service from "difficult to access" properties such as blocks of flats. The new service will utilise 2 special vehicles shared between SDC, MDC, SSDC and TDBC to collect recyclables from micro recycling sites. An example of real joined up partnership working.

### Food Safety

- Indian takeaway and restaurant initiative.  
Food safety officers often have difficulty communicating effectively with people whose English language skills are limited, particularly when trying to explain technical requirements. There can also be cultural barriers to overcome. This year we have engaged a Bengali speaking officer from another local authority to go into each Indian premises to advise on food safety issues, and to assist our own officers by training them in aspects of the culture of the Bengali community.

While it is too early to judge the effectiveness of this initiative there have been clear benefits, with improved standards of hygiene reported after the advisory visits programme.

### Licensing

- From May 2000 to date the number of fee paying PEL holders has risen from 40 to 85, this has been as a direct result of effective enforcement, the premises are safer and better policed than they ever were and the licensees are happier as there is now a "Level Playing Field".
- The Licensing Unit has a new Licensing Officer, Nicky Easton who has joined us from Trading Standards at Somerset County Council. She has replaced Natasha Mounce who had worked for TDBC for over 6 years.
- Following the Queen's Speech the Licensing Unit and myself are looking forward to the challenge of Liquor Licensing being transferred from the Magistrates to the Local Authority.
- Licensing of Churches for Public Entertainment  
Considerable concern was expressed at how any new regulations might affect the ability of churches and secular buildings to stage public entertainment events.

RESOLVED that representations be made to the Government and the Member of Parliament regarding the possible adverse affect this legislation might have on churches and secular buildings.

### Environmental Health Challenge

- Environmental Health decided to hold a challenge workshop for members of the Health and Leisure Panel and the Executive to fundamentally challenge the provision of the EH service as part of their best value review. It was felt that a workshop would be more likely to generate discussion than a report being presented to the panel. The Members were given information about the service, the results of the consultation exercise and a list of question to consider before the workshop. The discussion at the workshop was then based around the questions. The workshop went well and officers were pleased with the outcomes.

(i) Resources (Report of Councillor Partington)

Members' Allowances

A report of the Members' Allowance Review Panel was discussed by the Resources Review Panel on 28 November 2002. The recommendation of the Resources Review Panel together with those of the independent members' Allowances Panel will go to the Council on 25 February 2003 where the Council will make its decision taking into account all other budgetary considerations.

Members Room

There are occasions when more than one member requires the use of a computer in the Members' Room and some Members who have laptops require facilities. To improve the situation, there will be improvements in the next couple of weeks to the computer facilities in the Members' Room.

The number of work stations will be increased to three:

- (a) two PC tower systems with flat screens to maximise available desktop space are provided, to replace the existing desktop machine,
- (b) a USB hub with keyboard and mouse is provided to allow laptops to be connected to the network, and
- (c) a networked printer replaces the present inkjet.

(Councillor Mrs Whitmarsh left the meeting at 8.30 pm.)

(The meeting ended at 8.55 pm.)