

Taunton Deane Borough Council

At a meeting of Taunton Deane Borough Council held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on 13 April 2010 at 6.30 pm.

Present The Mayor (Councillor Bowrah)
The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Horsley)
Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Brooks, Cavill, Coles, Mrs Court-Stenning, Critchard, Denington, D Durdan, Ms Durdan, Farbahi, Mrs Floyd, Gaines, Govier, Hall, Hayward, Henley, Ms Herbert, C Hill, Mrs Hill, House, Miss James, R Lees, Mrs Lees, McMahan, Meikle, Morrell, Mullins, Murphy, Paul, Prior-Sankey, Mrs Smith, P Smith, Mrs Stock-Williams, Stone, Stuart-Thorn, Swaine, Thorne, Watson, Mrs Waymouth, Ms Webber, A Wedderkopp, D Wedderkopp, Mrs Whitmarsh, Williams and Mrs Wilson

Also present : Mrs Anne Elder, Chairman of the Standards Committee

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of Taunton Deane Borough Council held on 16 February 2010, copies having been sent to each Member, were signed by the Mayor.

2. Apologies

Councillors Beaven, Bishop, Mrs Copley, Edwards, Mrs Lewin-Harris and O'Brien.

3. Public Question Time

Mrs Julie Kimber asked whether there was any truth in the article that had appeared in the local press concerning the proposed construction of an eight floor tower block in the Halcon Area of Taunton?

She stated that she had attended a multi-agency meeting earlier in the year concerning plans to re-develop parts of Halcon. She had been under the impression that the information provided at that meeting was confidential. Was this no longer the case?

Mrs Kimber went on to say that the press article had caused local residents a great deal of anxiety.

In response, the Leader of the Council (Councillor Henley) stated that he was very angry about the story which was inaccurate. He confirmed that briefings had taken place on proposals to regenerate the Halcon area. He also confirmed that the Council did have an agenda to provide affordable housing, homes for larger families, green spaces and allotments, but not skyscrapers.

Councillor Henley reported that he wished to disassociate himself from the story in the newspaper and called upon the other Group Leaders to do the same.

Mr Peter Wren referred to the recent planning application which had been considered in relation to the provision of a new garden centre on land on the northern outskirts of Wellington. He noted that a safety and technical audit had been carried out by the Somerset County Council in respect of the site.

He asked why the County Council had declined to carry out such an audit in respect of the planning application relating to the development of land west of Bishops Hull Road, Taunton which had been determined in November last year?

In reply, Councillor Coles stated that he would find out the answer and would provide Mr Wren with a written answer within five working days.

4. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Coles declared a personal interest as a Director of Southwest One. Councillors Brooks, Govier, Paul, Prior-Sankey, Mrs Waymouth and D Wedderkopp declared personal interests as Members of Somerset County Council. Councillor Henley declared personal interests both as a Member of the Somerset County Council and as an employee of Job Centre Plus. Councillors Mullins and Slattery declared personal interests as Members of the Somerset Waste Board. Councillor Slattery also declared a personal interest as an employee of Sedgemoor District Council. Councillor Miss James declared a personal interest as an employee of Viridor. Councillors Mrs Court-Stenning, Mrs Hill, Mrs Smith and Stone declared personal interests as employees of Somerset County Council. Councillor Mrs Wilson declared a personal interest as an employee of Job Centre Plus. Councillor Murphy declared a personal interest as someone who carried out disabled facility grant work. He left the meeting during the discussion of Councillor A Wedderkopp's portfolio-holder's report.

5. Written Question to Member of the Executive

Councillor Morrell asked the following questions:-

"In my written questions at Full Council on the 16 February 2010 to the Leader of the Council I wish to point out a few inaccuracies in the response received. In addition, I will now attempt to prise out further detail from the answers.

- (1) My question regarding the limited amount achieved in actual physical regeneration on the ground in the eight years since Project Taunton was conceived in 2002 through the Taunton Vision Commission Document was challenged in the answer by stating that it had been four and a half years and not eight years since the delivery team were in place. It is not disputed that the project team have only been in place for four and a half years, but my question related to the 'project'

and not the project delivery team. My concerns therefore stand that apart from scoping documents, very little has been achieved in these eight years – which has led to the town centre becoming rundown and unattractive for shoppers and residents alike.

- (2) The answer to my question about Somerset Square being value for money states that Somerset Square “came in under the final budget”. This answer is misleading as it does not state the final cost despite referring to a “total cost of £550,000, with a further request for funding from Growth Points having been made”. The amount of this Growth Point Funding was actually some £400,000. However, and as will be reported to Corporate Scrutiny on the 15 April 2010 (Agenda Item 9, para 3.2), the total cost of all the works was: £903,590 out of a total budget of £950,000 (£250,000 S106 contribution, £300,000 land sale money, £400,000 Growth Point funding).

Therefore will the Leader of the Council confirm that the cost of Somerset Square overran considerably well in excess of the initial £550,000 budget. In addition, please can the Leader of the Council state why he feels such a significant financial overrun does not merit a forensic audit, especially when there are costs including the anomaly of £660 for photocopying / a photocopy machine.

- (3) In addition, please can it also be explained why the cost of Somerset Square increased significantly as confirmed in the answer “in order for the Brewhouse to receive its lorry deliveries to the back stage door”, when prior to the laying of the new tarmac over the existing car park they were in fact already delivering to this door. What additional site works were required over and above the provision already in place and what was the cost?
- (4) Since my question to Full Council in February 2010, what work has been undertaken to bridge the £120,000 annual budget gap which will arise when the car park at Castle Green is removed in order for the location to be a £3,800,000 green space?
- (5) With respect to the £3,800,000 proposed for this development and my question whether it represents value for money, although the answer implied subjective social benefits it did not answer the fiscal implications. Please can the Leader of the Council confirm what fidelity steps and safeguards have been undertaken to ensure that the projected project costs represent value for taxpayers money and will not have a significant overrun similar to that at Somerset Square?

Councillor Henley replied as follows:-

- “(1) Councillor Morrell should be very careful not to talk down Taunton’s Town Centre. The public/private partnership that is in place to drive development forward in Taunton has made good progress. As far as

Firepool is concerned, the former Market site has now been cleared ready for re-development to commence.

As to the town centre, a £3,000,000 refurbishment of the Old Market Centre to become the "Orchard" shopping centre was completed before Christmas. Since then works to some of the trees and paving have been completed to improve the appearance of High Street which, combined with the opening of Mr Miles's Tea Shop and the forthcoming appearance of a Tesco store, is sure to increase future footfall.

- (2) The report being submitted to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 15 April 2010 makes it clear that the £550,000 was based on an estimate.

I agree that the final cost went over that amount but an open process to agree this was followed before any spend was incurred by getting approval from the Project Taunton Steering Group and the Executive (as outlined in the Scrutiny report). The final cost for the area that the £550,000 estimate was for, was £798,000.

- (3) In order to get planning permission, the Environment Agency required the land levels to be raised to meet the current flood protection standards. This entailed new concrete foundations in order to carry the lorries. The costs are within the overall scheme.
- (4) The gap has already been covered in this year's budget (2010/2011). The loss of income from Castle Green was part of the budget gap that we had to close in order for us to present a balanced budget. There is no one thing that has been done to cover this part of the budget gap – we dealt with the total gap as a whole and took measures to ensure that we closed it. I refer you to the budget papers presented to Full Council.
- (5) The true cost of Castle Green will only be known when tenders are received. Should these come in over the current budget allocation (which is only available if Growth Point funding is received this year) it will be for Members to decide if they wish:-

- (a) to amend the scheme to bring it within the budget allocation;
- (b) to abandon the scheme; or
- (c) to allocate further funding from Growth Points should it be available.

Discussion on this would be at the Project Taunton Steering Group and it would require an Executive decision.

6. Reports of the Leader of the Council and Executive Councillors

The following reports were made to the Council on the main items of current and future business.

(i) **Leader of the Council (Councillor Henley)**

Councillor Henley's report covered the following topics:-

- Employment Land;
- The Brewhouse Theatre;
- Core Council Review;
- Climate Change;
- Free Swimming;
- Southwest One Review;
- General Election;
- Investors in People and Staff Survey;
- Olympic Torch Relay.

(During the discussion of Councillor Henley's report a motion to proceed to the next business was proposed by Councillor Denington and seconded by Councillor Mrs Allgrove. The motion was put and was lost.)

(ii) **Resources (Councillor Mrs Wilson)**

The report from Councillor Mrs Wilson provided information on the following areas within her portfolio:-

- Southwest One Customer Contact Highlights;
- Update on progress with Investors in People Action Plan;
- Performance and Client Team Update;
- Revenues and Benefits Service Unit.

(iii) **Community Leadership (Councillor A Wedderkopp)**

Councillor A Wedderkopp presented the Community Leadership report which focused on the following areas within that portfolio:-

- Corporate Strategy 2010-2013 (Key Priorities);
- Equalities;
- The Private Sector Housing Partnership.

(iv) **Communications (Councillor Paul)**

Before submitting his report, Councillor Paul announced that he would be stepping down from the Executive at the end of the Municipal Year. He thanked the Council's Public Relations Officer, Mrs Debbie Rundle, for her support during his time as the Communications Portfolio Holder.

Councillor Paul's report covered the following topics:-

- Press Releases;
- The forthcoming General Election;

- Somerset Public Service Communications Group;
- The use of Social Media.

(v) **Planning Policy and Transportation (Councillor Coles)**

Councillor Coles submitted his report, which drew attention to the following:-

- Recent Legislative changes which came into effect on 6 April 2010;
- Local Development Framework Core Strategy and Site Allocations;
- Car Park Closures;
- Residents' Parking in Taunton;
- Proposed County-wide Civil Parking Enforcement Project.

(vi) **Economic Development and the Arts (Councillor Mrs Smith)**

The report from Councillor Mrs Smith covered:-

- Core Council Review - Update and appointments;
- Overview of current activities;
- Project Taunton;
- Tourist Information.

(vii) **Sports, Parks and Leisure (Councillor R Lees)**

The report from Councillor R Lees dealt with activities taking place in the following areas:-

- Community Leisure;
- Play;
- Parks;
- Tone Leisure (Taunton Deane) Limited Activities.

(viii) **Environmental Services (Councillor Slattery)**

The Report from Councillor Slattery drew attention to developments in the following areas:-

- Food and Health and Safety Team;
- Environmental Protection Team;
- Waste Management.

(ix) **Housing Services (Councillor Prior-Sankey)**

Councillor Prior-Sankey submitted her report which drew attention to the following:-

- Review of Council Housing Finance;
- Somerset West Private Sector Housing Partnership – Working on a new ‘Housing Adaptations and Housing Options Agreement’;
- Increase in Disabled Facilities Grant Funding;
- Tenant Empowerment;
- Review of Homefinder Somerset Choice Based Lettings Scheme.

(Councillor Critchard declared a personal interest as a tenant of Sanctuary Housing Association during the discussion of Councillor Prior-Sankey’s report. He left the meeting for the remainder of the discussion.)

7. **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

Resolved that the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting for the following item because of the likelihood that exempt information would otherwise be disclosed relating to Clause 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12(A) to the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

8. **Recommendation to Council from the Executive**

Potential Purchase of Capital Asset, Taunton

At its meeting immediately preceding Council, the Executive gave detailed consideration to a report relating to the potential purchase of a capital asset in Taunton.

There were a number of reasons as to why it is felt the Council should purchase the asset including:-

- Jobs would be retained in Taunton Deane;
- The current business already on the site could be offered the opportunity to remain and develop on the site;
- There would be employment space available to other businesses; and
- The purchase would provide an investment for the Council which, in the medium term, would produce a good return.

Taunton was currently short of employment land and the purchase of the asset would enable the Council to fulfil a number of its key priorities – in particular safeguarding the economy and, to a lesser degree, the provision of some affordable housing.

During the discussion of this item, Members agreed that the proposed recommendation (8) should be amended to ensure a Panel of Councillors was involved in the possible sale of other assets in Taunton Deane’s ownership.

On the motion of Councillor Mrs Smith, it was

Resolved that:-

- (1) The purchase of the site be agreed with the aim of completing by the summer of 2010 subject to negotiation and letters of intent from the potential lessees;
- (2) During the negotiating period, the Leader and Shadow Leader be given the authority to sign off the final deal;
- (3) An appropriate supplementary estimate for the 2010/2011 Capital Programme be approved for this capital project, including approval to borrow for costs that could not be met from other public funding available, up to the maximum reported;
- (4) Supplementary estimates for the 2010/2011 revenue implications be also approved, subject to final confirmation of the budget implications and capital financing adopted;
- (5) If the purchase was agreed, a small group of officers and Members be set up immediately to develop a strategic plan for the use of the site;
- (6) If the site was purchased, commercial agents be engaged to market the site to potential occupiers;
- (7) The income from the site be used in the following priority order:-
 - To service any debt arising from the purchase;
 - To replace the current annual income to the Council;
 - To support the General Fund;
- (8) Other assets in the Council's ownership be considered for sale and a review by a Members Panel and any resulting capital receipts to be set aside to pay off the debt incurred; and
- (9) Development work should not be carried on the site by the Council, but through a suitable development partner.

(Councillors Thorne and Govier left the meeting at 7.05 pm and 7.34 pm respectively.)

(The meeting ended at 8.17 pm.)