

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 10 April 2012 at 6.30 pm.

Present The Mayor (Councillor Brooks)
The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Hall)
Councillors Mrs Adkins, Mrs Allgrove, Mrs Baker, Beaven, Bishop, Bowrah, Cavill, Coles, Denington, D Durdan, Ms Durdan, Edwards, Farbahi, Mrs Floyd, Gaines, A Govier, Hayward, Henley, Mrs Herbert, C Hill, Mrs Hill, Horsley, Hunt, R Lees, Ms Lisgo, Meikle, Morrell, Mullins, Nottrodt, Ms Palmer, Prior-Sankey, D Reed, Gill Slattery, T Slattery, Mrs Smith, P Smith, Mrs Stock-Williams, Stone, Swaine, Tooze, Mrs Warmington, Watson, Mrs Waymouth, Ms Webber, A Wedderkopp, D Wedderkopp, Williams and Wren

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

1. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of Taunton Deane Borough Council held on 21 February 2012, copies having been sent to each Member, were signed by the Mayor.

The Democratic Services Manager reported that the Prudential Indicators attached as an Appendix to the recommendation to the last meeting of the Council concerning the General Fund Revenue Estimates 2012/2013 had been the incorrect version. The correct copy had been appended to the minutes.

2. **Apologies**

Councillors Mrs Govier, Miss James, Mrs Lees, Mrs Messenger, Mrs Reed and Ross.

3. **Declaration of Interests**

Councillors Brooks, A Govier, Prior-Sankey 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. Councillor Mrs Waymouth declared personal interests both as a Member of Somerset County Council and in respect of her involvement with Taunton School. Councillors Mrs Hill, Mrs Smith and Stone declared personal interests as employees of Somerset County Council. Councillor Wren declared personal interests as an employee of Natural England and as Clerk to Milverton Parish Council. Councillors Hayward declared a personal interest as one of the Council's representatives on the Somerset Waste Board. Councillor Nottrodt declared a personal interest as a Director of Southwest One. Councillors D Durdan and Stone declared prejudicial interests as Tone Leisure Board representatives and left the meeting during the discussion of agenda item No.7. Councillor Tooze

declared a personal interest as an employee of the UK Hydrographic Office. Councillor Swaine, as a part-time swimming instructor at St James Street Pool, declared a personal interest. Councillor Mullins declared a personal interest as EDF Energy at Hinkley Point was his employer. Gill Slattery declared a personal interest as a member of the Board of Governors at Somerset College.

5. **Public Question Time**

(1) Vicki Phillips representing the Taunton – Lisieux Civic Link asked Councillors if they knew what Lisieux had to do with Taunton?

She asked because it was only about a year ago she learned that Lisieux was a town in northern France which had been twinned with Taunton for 57 years. Every year, a small group of people from each town met up to ensure this historical link was continued.

Last year a visit to France was made – a trip which was full of friendship and history that it was felt this should be passed on to future generations. In May the French group will again be visiting Taunton.

The reason for bringing this matter to the attention of the Council was that this historical Civic twinning needed more people to keep it going. More hosts were desperately needed to accommodate the French visitors and more interest from local residents generally about the twinning was required before the link was broken.

Mrs Phillips stated that surely part of the role of being a Councillor was to try and maintain historical links that promoted Taunton. She therefore asked what the Council would do to ensure the twinning carried on?

In response the Leader of the Council, Councillor Williams, thanked Mrs Phillips for her questions. He acknowledged that the twinning link between the two towns was longstanding and hoped Councillors would provide more support for the annual visits between the towns.

(2) Mr Martin Aldred asked the following questions concerning the proposed redevelopment of Halcon North:-

(a) With regard to the Council's web portal document reference TA187, was it correct that the tenants and residents of Halcon North could be left in limbo until 2017-2022?

(b) Why have requests to meet with the Leader of the Council to discuss the proposed redevelopment not, so far, met with success?

(c) Many people in the area did not have a stable home life and the threat of losing their homes was not helping in any way. Would the Council please work with the Tenants and Residents Association to make the lives of these people more secure?

Mr Aldred then handed in a petition containing almost 400 signatures against the Council's redevelopment proposals. He went on to say that he intended

to continue attending Council meetings to ask questions until a full and satisfactory outcome for the community of Halcon North was achieved.

In response, Councillor Mrs Adkins reported that she was not aware of the document TA187 referred to by Mr Aldred. The other questions asked were noted.

6. Proposed Tone Leisure Loan for a High Ropes Project in Vivary Park, Taunton

Considered report previously circulated, which sought the relevant budget and funding approvals to make a loan to Tone Leisure for the installation of a High Ropes leisure facility in Vivary Park, Taunton over the top of the mini golf course.

High Ropes courses were becoming a growing leisure activity, recommended to be set in natural environments. The Vivary High Ropes course would provide two separate aerial trekking experiences at differing heights. Participants were secured permanently via a harness to a steel rail/rope overhead and were led by an instructor. The course was likely to be one of the largest in the South West and a real attraction to both Taunton and Vivary Park.

Tone Leisure would be working with a partner organisation called "Closer to the Edge" to develop programmes, operational practices and recruit and train staff. The design of the course had been completed with Closer to the Edge and JM Adventure, who had built many courses around the country.

The project investment was set at £318,000, of which £300,000 was for the High Ropes course, equipment and storage, with the remainder allocated to remodel some areas of the current café/ hut/ pro-shop. Staff costs, maintenance costs and Closer to the Edge support costs had been factored into a business plan.

Income was projected at £157,960 in year one, building to £273,350 by year three. The first year profile of visitors had been extended to an average of 300 visits per week for 40 weeks of the year. These 12,000 visits in year one would grow to 22,000 by year three.

Reported that the full business case had been scrutinized by Southwest One Taunton Deane Finance Advisory and Taunton Deane Legal Services. Although a number of risks had been highlighted these would be mitigated through the terms of the loan agreement.

The proposal was for the Council to offer a loan to Tone Leisure that provided value to the taxpayer and to Tone Leisure. As such, the loan proposed would be classed as a "soft loan" which essentially meant that the Council would be offering a loan with an interest rate that was marginally below the rate Tone Leisure could obtain from a financial institution.

The proposed loan was for £318,000, to be repaid over a period of 5½ years (66 months), with a fixed interest rate of 4%. The total interest on the loan would be approximately £40,000.

The loan would be repaid in ten instalments, with the first instalment falling due after 12 months with the remaining nine instalments to be made at six-monthly intervals.

Noted that the project investment was for items which, if the Council had undertaken the scheme, would be treated as capital expenditure. As such, the Council needed to approve the budget as a Supplementary increase to the General Fund Capital Programme. In doing so the Council needed to also approve the funding of the loan.

Further reported that the funding options were:-

- (a) To finance it through “borrowing” and therefore by levying Minimum Revenue Provision (capital debt repayment provision) against the General Fund over a number of years. This would impact on General Reserves; or
- (b) Not to finance the expenditure at inception of the loan and adopt a policy to apply the capital receipts from the loan repayments to finance the original expenditure. As the loan was to be advanced on an Equal Instalments of Principal basis, then the Council could demonstrate that it was making a “prudent provision” each year.

The recommended option was (b). This meant that the loan arrangement did not impact on General Reserve balances. Instead the capital receipts arising from the loan repayment instalments would be used to ‘finance’ the original loan.

In the very unlikely event that Tone Leisure defaulted on the loan, the Council would be required to finance the outstanding balance of un-financed capital expenditure by making either Minimum Revenue Provision or setting aside other uncommitted capital resources. However, protection against any default had been included within the terms of the loan agreement, and risk of default was considered to be remote.

Resolved that:-

- (1) The issuing of a loan of up to £318,000 to Tone Leisure for the purpose of installing a High Ropes facility in Vivary Park, Taunton be approved;
- (2) A Supplementary Budget of £318,000 to be added to the Council’s 2012/2013 General Fund Capital Programme for the purposes of the loan to Tone Leisure be approved;
- (3) A policy be approved to apply the capital receipts arising from the loan principal repayments to finance the original expenditure; and
- (4) The requirement, in the event of loan repayment default, to finance any

outstanding balance of un-financed capital expenditure by making either Minimum Revenue Provision from the General Fund or to set aside other uncommitted capital resources be noted.

6. **Written Questions to Members of the Executive**

(i) From Councillor Horsley to Councillor Williams – 2011/2012 Budget

I was delighted to read in the Financial and Performance for the third quarter of the current year 2011/2012 that the likely overspend for this year had been contained at £313,000 when the prognostication after Quarter 1 was that this was going to be over £600,000.

However I wish to know why you used the figure of £600,000 as the likely overspend for the current year during the budget debates leading to its adoption at Full Council, on 21 February 2012.

Less than two weeks later at the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and then again on 14 March 2012 at the Executive, the Financial and Performance figures confirmed the overspend had been contained at £313,000.

Was this a genuine error banding around the figure of £600,000 or was it deliberate skulduggery on the part of the ruling group to create fear to get passed their budget with so many cuts in services from which the public are going to suffer in the forthcoming months?

Reply - The latest budget monitoring position for 2011/2012 was clearly set out in the report to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 23 February 2012. Appendix B of this report sets out the headline forecast position of the General Fund. We of course will not know the actual position until May / June this year once the accounts have been prepared.

The forecast at Quarter 1 showed a projected overspend of £805,000. This was revised down to a projected overspend of £316,000 at Quarter 2 and is now forecast at £313,000 in our Quarter 3 reports. This “bottom line” position is made up of many individual variances – some of which will continue this year and in future years, and some will not.

The budget for 2012/2013 is set using our best estimates of those items that will continue in future years (for example the estimated shortfall in car parking income amounts to £530,000 alone for reasons that have been well rehearsed previously), therefore the clear and prudent advice was that £600,000 was the best estimate at the time.

As regards whether it was an error or not, we will not know this until possibly June 2012 but it certainly was not skulduggery!

(ii) From Councillor Henley to Councillor Williams – The current local economic situation

Would the Leader of the Council care to comment on the double whammy impact that the closure of Debenhams Back Office with the loss of 250 jobs in Taunton Deane is going to have on the local economy alongside the failure of the Town Centre Company and the BID Board to win approval for their second five year Business Plan for the Taunton Centre?

Will he admit that the current administration have been complacent and not helped proactively enough in overcoming the economic downturn? Will he agree with me that the Council's support for the Town Centre Company has been little more than lip service over the past few years and not much more than tokenism?

When will he recognise that the combination of the cuts that this council alongside the much greater ones taken by Somerset County Council are reducing consumer demand and impoverishing the local business community leading to more vacancies both in jobs and in shop lettings? Has he spoken to the Leader of Somerset County Council about the impact that job losses from the public sector is having on the spending power in the local economy?

What is his strategy to encourage Taunton Deane to overcome this gloomy background and to bring about even the semblance of some economic recovery? Where are the jobs going to come from which are so desperately needed if we are to meet fulfill some of the objectives of the Core Strategy and the Local Plan?

Reply - Since their possible redundancy announcement I would not wish to prejudge the outcome of any consultation process but we have contacted Debenhams and will try to work with them to mitigate any loss of the jobs.

The loss of the Business Improvement District vote (BID 2) has to be extremely disappointing and we will do all we can to work with the Taunton Town Centre Company (TTCCo) to mitigate the impact of the loss of funding. However it has to be recognised that we cannot step in and replace the resources or funding the traders have rejected, albeit by a very narrow margin. We will continue working with the TTCCO to try and find the best solution.

Members will be aware that £20,000 per year has been given by the Council to the TTCCo. In addition to that we have recently given them additional funding to assist with BID 2. The February Executive agreed to an additional £5000 being allocated from our Business Growth Initiatives budget to enable a ballot to be held on behalf of the TTCCo. We have also assisted the TTCCo in many other ways, for example the Shop Taunton campaign where we joined forces with the Somerset County Gazette and the TTCCo to offer prizes of £1000 worth of free parking. Car window stickers were used, and those that won one of the awards for shopping in Taunton received six vouchers allowing a day's free parking. So successful was this that it was repeated on 29 and 30 October. This also enabled the Shop Taunton supporters promotion of their business published free of charge in the Gazette on 27 October.

It is a gloomy picture throughout the Country so, far from being complacent, we are trying to buck that trend and have had considerable achievements despite the recession such as:-

- Completion of the Goodlands Gardens, Taunton refurbishment in February;
- Viridor's investment in Firepool, Taunton due to open this Summer;
- Crest Nicholson starting their new houses at the back of Firepool in June;
- Completion of Castle Green, Taunton in July; and
- The refurbishment of the High Street, Taunton which was currently under way.

We have ambitious plans to encourage more footfall in Taunton Town Centre through one off events, such as the Olympic Torch Relay and longer term plans for a new weekly produce market on Somerset Square, regular events and activities on Castle Green, and improving the weekly Farmer's market on the High Street. Details will be presented to Members as and when they are worked up.

In the Summer we will roll out our new inward investment marketing campaign, which aligns Project Taunton with the Economic Development Team's Deane-wide marketing activities, looking at refreshed web presence, and things such as media campaigns.

We are also working with Jeremy Browne MP and Councillor Farbahi on the Ambassador's Event on 21May 2012 to try to open up trading doors with South Korea. We are most grateful for Councillor Farbahi's efforts in this respect.

In respect of the impact of Somerset County Council changes this is an issue for Councillor Henley to take up direct as a County Councillor. It is not for this Council to comment as only they know the position they face.

(iii) From Councillor Morrell to Councillor Cavill – Relocation of Taunton Police Station and Project Taunton

- (a) What was the current status with respect to the relocation of Taunton Police Station to The Deane House?
- (b) When might elected Members obtain an update from officers on the relocation of the Police Station Project?
- (c) Have Project Taunton had a Project Plan in place, and if so, I would be grateful if copies were provided to Elected Members within five working days; and
- (d) When would The Council have an opportunity to review the forward Project Plan for Project Taunton?

Reply – In respect of questions (a) and (b), the Executive has previously authorised a detailed and costed Feasibility Study to be carried out by Southwest One into the potential for relocating the town centre Police presence to The Deane House. This study has recently been received and is the subject of comprehensive examination by our officers and Avon and Somerset Constabulary's Project Team. Once these are complete, the recommendations will be brought before Scrutiny and the Executive during the Summer.

With regard to questions (c) and (d), the new Growth and Regeneration Team was being established and a combined "Project Plan" will be ready for discussion later in the year. The work of the current Project Taunton Team is the subject of regular review by the Project Taunton Advisory Board and the Taunton Deane Project Taunton Steering Group.

As was recently requested, the Project Taunton report to the Steering Group has been circulated to Councillors and, in future, is planned to be placed in the Weekly Bulletin after the Steering Group's meeting.

7. **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 Williams)**

Councillor Williams's report covered the following topics:-

- All Change;
- Taunton Business Improvement District (BID) Process;
- Southwest One;
- Broadband Enhancement;
- Northern Inner Distributor Road (NIDR) and other road issues;
- Core Strategy;
- Housing – Reinvigorating Right to Buy and One for One Replacement;
- Economic Development, Taunton Deane.

(ii) **Housing Services (Councillor Mrs Adkins)**

Councillor Mrs Adkins submitted her report which drew attention to the following:-

- Housing Property Services;
- Affordable Housing Development Partnership;
- Affordable Housing Target;
- Estates Team and Anti-social Behaviour;
- Homelessness and Rough-Sleeping;
- Jubilee Gardens, Priorswood Place, Taunton;
- Self-Financing;

- Social Housing Fraud Consultation.

(iii) **Corporate Resources (Councillor Mrs Stock-Williams)**

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

- Customer Contact Centre;
- Legal and Democratic Services;
- Performance and Client Team;
- Revenues and Benefits;
- Southwest One; and
- Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board.

(iv) **Planning, Transportation and Communications (Councillor Edwards)**

The report from Councillor Edwards provided information on the following areas within his portfolio:-

- Core Strategy;
- National Planning Policy Framework;
- Neighbourhood Planning;
- Community Infrastructure Levy;
- Heritage – Tone Works and Sandhill Park;
- Landscape Team;
- County-wide Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) Project; and
- Communications.

(v) **Community Leadership (Councillor Mrs Jane Warmington)**

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

- Police and Crime Panel;
- Community Policing Awards;
- Health;
- Priority Areas Strategy;
- Community Development Team and
- Voluntary and Community Sector Grants Panel.

(vi) **Economic Development, Asset Management, Arts and Tourism (Councillor Cavill)**

The report from Councillor Cavill covered:-

- Stimulating Business Growth and Investment;
- Ensuring a Skilled and Entrepreneurial Workforce;
- Creating an Attractive Business Environment;

- Taunton Tourist Information, Ticket and Travel Centre; and
- Asset Management.

(vii) **Environmental Services and Climate Change (Councillor Hayward)**

The report from Councillor Hayward drew attention to developments in the following areas:-

- Environmental Health;
- Climate Change / Carbon Management;
- Waste Management; and
- Deane DLO Update.

(viii) **Sport, Parks and Leisure (Councillor Mrs Herbert)**

The report from Councillor Mrs Herbert dealt with activities taking place in the following areas:-

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

(Councillors A Govier and Stone left the meeting at 8.23 pm and 8.47 pm respectively. Councillors Mrs Smith and P Smith left the meeting at 8.54 pm. Councillors D Durdan, Ms Durdan and C Hill all left the meeting at 8.55 pm. Councillors Ms Webber and Wren left the meeting at 8.57 pm.)

(The meeting ended at 9.13 pm.)