

# **Council Meeting – 11 December 2018**

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

### **1. Chief Executive Designate**

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Special Shadow Council on 19 November 2018, the appointment of James Hassett as Chief Executive Designate (including being Head of the Paid Service, Returning Officer, Electoral Registration Officer and a Core Member of the Central Implementation Team) for the Somerset West and Taunton Council was agreed with effect from 1 January 2019 and that he be confirmed as the new permanent Chief Executive, Head of Paid Service, Returning Officer, Electoral Registration Officer and a Core Member of the Central Implementation Team for the Somerset West and Taunton Council from 1 April, 2019.
- 1.2 On behalf of the Council I offer a warm welcome to James and we look forward to him taking up his post in the New Year.

### **2. New Council**

- 2.1 Good progress is being made on preparations for the new Council which comes into being in April 2019.
- 2.2 The Boundary Commission's Warding Review recommendations have been published and, subject to Parliamentary approval, Somerset West and Taunton Council will be made up of 59 elected members. This a key milestone, essential to planning for the May 2019 elections.
- 2.3 Further constitutional orders are progressing through the system with the Ministry of Housing Local Government and Communities (MHCLG).

### **3. New Chair – Taunton Strategic Advisory Board**

- 3.1 On 5 November Greg Saunders was appointed as the new Chair of the Taunton Strategic Advisory Board following an interview process.
- 3.2 Greg is a Commercial Dispute Resolution Partner, Notary Public and Accredited Mediator at Clarke Willmott. He is also Chairman of Somerset Chamber of Commerce and sits on other charitable and private company boards. After his appointment was confirmed he said: *"I am delighted to accept this position. I am passionate about Somerset and Taunton especially. It is home for my young family and I will do everything I can to offer guidance and support with the help of the Board to enable Taunton to go from strength to strength. I feel like these are incredibly exciting times with*

*Garden Town status being announced and other initiatives ready to go and if we all work together we can deliver a vision to be immensely proud of.”*

- 3.3 I welcome Greg as I am sure as an independent Chairman and his private sector experience he will contribute greatly towards the development and regeneration of Taunton and area.

## **4. Proposed Dualling of the A358 - Progress**

- 4.1 The project team at Highways England are still undertaking assessment work around the route options for the proposed dualling of the A358 through Taunton Deane. I am advised that when they have completed this, they will need to gain formal approval before they can announce the preferred route. Highways England have stated that they hope to have an update on the timeline for the announcement shortly, which when pressed, they explained meant in the next few weeks. Based on conversations officers have had with Highways England, I would expect that the preferred route announcement date will now be in December towards the end of this year.
- 4.2 It has always been the intention that as soon as the preferred route has been announced, Highways England will proceed to formalise and inaugurate the ‘Community Liaison Forum’, which will help shape and influence decisions relating to the preferred route. This is now not expected to begin sitting until the New Year.
- 4.3 Meanwhile, Highways England have reached the Preliminary Meeting stage for the equivalent proposal for dualling of the A358/A303 within the South Somerset District Council area. This project has always been ahead of the stretch of the road running through Taunton Deane Borough Council’s jurisdiction. The purpose of the Preliminary Meeting is to discuss the examination procedure and enable views to be put to The Planning Inspectorate about the way in which the application is to be examined, not the merits of the application itself. Officers have agreed that this Council should take a watching brief at this stage. However, agreement has been reached with officers at South Somerset about joint co-operation on the two projects with a view to pooling knowledge and resources.

## **5. Refurbishment of The Deane House**

- 5.1 Our Phase 2 works on the first floor were completed at the beginning of October 2018. We now occupy all three newly refurbished wings, with open plan working, hot desking and flexible meeting space. Everyone has settled in well and the heating issues are now fully resolved.
- 5.2 The Avon and Somerset Police (ASP) area on the ground floor of The Deane House reached sectional completion on Friday, 9 November 2018. Taunton Deane granted early access rights to ASP from Monday, 19 November 2018

for them to install furniture and IT kit. Lease completion is planned for Friday, 7 December 2018 and we will start receiving income from ASP in March 2019.

- 5.3 Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) have been marketing the available space at The Deane House and are having good discussions with various potential tenants, including serviced office providers.
- 5.4 Work on our new second lift continues from next week and as soon as it is complete Midas will start work on the existing lift, which will be completely replaced.
- 5.5 The John Meikle Room and Committee Rooms 1 and 2 are currently being refurbished and are scheduled to be completed during mid to end of February 2019, which means our Council meetings will return to The Deane House from March.
- 5.6 From the 14 point plan for Employment and Skills Plan (ESP), Midas have just two items to complete – (1) 'Work Placement Age 16+' which will be completed by Christmas as they have students due to join them for a week in December 2018 from Taunton and Bridgwater College and (2) 'Graduate' to have worked on the project, which unfortunately they will not achieve as they do not currently have any within the local business. They have over achieved in 10 of the 14 points which will in the view of the Construction Industry Training Board make up for the one which they are unable to do.
- 5.7 My sincere thanks to all staff for their resilience and fortitude when being relocated around the building as work progressed and for some uncomfortable days before the heating was operational. Your commitment was incredible... thank you all.

## **6. Retail Relief – Guidance from the Government**

- 6.1 In the budget announced recently I am pleased to note some further help for businesses, as below, was announced. I can confirm that work has started to identify those businesses that may qualify in accordance with the following guidance.
- 6.2 The Government has announced a new relief scheme for retail properties that have a rateable value of below £51,000. Under the scheme, eligible ratepayers will receive a one third discount of their daily chargeable amount. The definition of retail properties will follow that adopted from the previous Retail Relief Scheme in 2014/2015 and 2015/2016.
- 6.3 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government plans to publish guidance on the operation of the relief scheme for retail shortly. However, local authorities should begin preparations for implementation on the basis of the definition of retail in the previous Retail Relief Scheme. The relief will have effect for 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 and should be applied from the start of the billing cycle. State aid rules will apply to the retail relief in the normal way.

- 6.4 Local authorities will be expected to use their Discretionary Relief powers (under Section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, as amended) to grant this new relief for retail properties in line with the relevant eligibility criteria. They will be compensated for the cost of granting the relief through a Section 31 Grant from the Government. No new legislation will be required to deliver the scheme.
- 6.5 We are working at present on the basis of existing guidance and the full guidance setting out the terms of this relief have yet to be issued so the advice, as above, has to be conditional until details are received and we are in a position to better understand these changes.
- 6.6 The important point is that we make all necessary preparations to deliver this relief to eligible businesses in a timely manner.

## **7. Proposed Development of the Tangier Site, Taunton with 182 New Homes**

- 7.1 This site has a long and chequered history and I am pleased to say that that this revised scheme is coming forward to replace the extant permission since pre-2008 for 225 units in total. The current application is for a scheme of 182 units and is going to the Planning Committee for a decision on 5 December 2018 with a recommendation of Conditional Approval subject to a Section 106 Agreement for the implementation of a Travel Plan.
- 7.2 This has been a very complex site to bring forward but with time the issues have been resolved and, if approved, it will be great to see yet another brown field site in a prime position, being developed and delivering much needed homes for Taunton.

Finally, as it is our last Full Council Meeting before Christmas, may I wish all staff and Members a very Merry Christmas and a happy and healthy New Year.

Councillor John Williams