

Council Meeting – 20 March 2019

Report of Councillor John Williams – Leader of the Council

1. New Council and Re-organisation

- 1.1 This has been a time of significant change for our organisation as we transition from Taunton Deane Borough Council to Somerset West and Taunton Council on 1 April 2019 delivering the vision in the Business Case approved by Taunton Deane and West Somerset Councils and our 2017 submission to the Secretary of State.
- 1.2 A great deal of hard work and preparation has got us to this point.
- 1.3 Although we look forward to an exciting and more sustainable future as a new Council, we recognise that not all of our staff will be making that journey.
- 1.4 Many members of staff have left, or will be leaving, the Council. I am sure the Council will join me in recognising the huge contribution made over the years by those staff who are leaving and offer our thanks and sincerest best wishes for whatever the future may hold for them.
- 1.5 The main body of the internal Phase 2 recruitment, into the Customer function (Case Managers, Customer Champions and Specialists) and the 'DLO' has now been completed. Staff commence working in these new roles and structure from April.
- 1.6 We welcome new staff and congratulate those existing officers who have been appointed to the new structure - ready to work in new ways and in a rewarding environment to deliver efficient, customer-focused services to our communities.
- 1.7 Formed from an earlier merger of the Municipal Borough of Taunton, Wellington Urban District, Taunton Rural District and Wellington Rural District, after nearly 45 years this is the final Full Council meeting of Taunton Deane Borough Council.
- 1.8 I recognise it is a sad event but equally a time to reflect and celebrate all that has been achieved over those years.
- 1.9 It is also a time to look forward with optimism. Local government in Taunton Deane and West Somerset is embarking on a more secure future that benefits the communities we serve and helps better protect the services on which they rely.

2. Proposed dualling of the A358 – Update on Progress

- 2.1 Highways England (HE) has recently made clear that their announcement on the Preferred Route for the new dualled A358 will be made in the spring of this year. When pushed they accepted that this meant a decision before the summer, for which they have used the meteorological definition - i.e. 21st June. Based on conversations the officers have had with HE, I would not expect any announcement to be made before the forthcoming local elections, although technically they could make the announcement at any time.
- 2.2 HE have already held an inaugural meeting of the 'Community Liaison Forum'. This was done at Somerset County Cricket Club on 26 February 2019. It was thought to be helpful to have a gathering of all interested parties before the Preferred Route Announcement, as an introduction for all present on the process, how it will pan out, timings and how people can interact with the various processes involved. Taunton Deane Borough Council, South Somerset District Council, local Parish Councils, businesses and interest groups attended and participated at this meeting. The Community Liaison Forum will next meet after the Preferred Route Announcement.
- 2.3 Moving forward, HE has confirmed the following broad general timings for the various parts of the whole process:-
- The Preferred Route Announcement - before 21 June 2019 (unless anything unforeseen intervenes);
 - The design and development stage - approximately a 16 to 18 month period after the Preferred Route Announcement;
 - A statutory public consultation period of six weeks (the prescribed norm) after the design stage;
 - After the statutory consultation period, the formal submission of the Development Consent Order to the Government (The Planning Inspectorate), and the holding of a public inquiry (likely to last for six months);
 - After the close of the public inquiry, a further period for The Planning Inspectorate to submit their recommendation to the Secretary of State (probably three months), a further period (again likely to be three months) for the Secretary of State to decide; and
 - Finally, there has to be an allowance of time to give the opportunity for any legal challenges.
- 2.4 All this means that realistically we are probably at least three and a half to four years away from any physical works taking place on the ground.

3. Works to Junction 25 of the M5 Motorway and progress report on Nexus 25

- 3.1 Update for Junction 25 – Somerset County Council has now entered in contract with Alun Griffiths and works are being planned to start on the 18 March 2019. However, early site clearance commenced during the week commencing 25 February 2019 to mitigate the risk of affecting the bird nesting season in March.

- 3.2 Positive progress with Nexus 25, Henry Boot Developments are responsible for the employment park working with Summerfields and they are already hard at work.
- 3.3 We met with the Henry Boot Director responsible who confirmed they have examined the approved scheme and they are seeking minor amendments to the proposed road layout. It does not change the substantive scheme but just allows better separation of HGV vehicles for the section for more industrial use. A planning application seeking an amendment has now been lodged and will be considered through the normal process.
- 3.4 The director commented on the benefits of using the Local Development Order process with the result that planning consent was granted early so giving certainty for both developer and investor in terms of commencement and delivery; a great asset for the development.
- 3.5 In terms of delivery of the site and buildings they are looking to start on site as soon as the planning amendment is approved and construct the first phase of infrastructure so allowing marketing to commence in earnest in about six months' time. They are aiming to have first occupation in approximately two years to coincide with completion of the major works to Junction 25. Very good news and real commitment to delivering this important strategic employment site.

4. The Deane House

- 4.1 The Deane House refurbishment is now finished (apart from the agreed additional works to the Automatic Opening Vents in the stairwells). Midas completed the works on time, to a high quality and agreed budget.
- 4.2 Avon and Somerset Police have now been in occupation for three months and are enjoying working from The Deane House. We have already seen benefits to our customers with our teams working together within the Customer Hub.
- 4.3 We continue to market the available space on the ground and first floors with Agents, Lambert Smith Hampton, and in addition to this we are also appointing a well-established local agent too. We are continuing to have detailed conversations with potential tenants, but at this time we do not have any firm commitment to report.
- 4.4 Following the completion of the refurbishment Deane House has been valued at £6,000,000 based on the works complete and £9,500,000 based on works complete and fully let. The previous valuation from SW1 a few years ago was £2,500,000.

5. Country Park

- 5.1 Planning Permission was granted in January 2018 for the change of use of two fields at Maidenbrook Lane, from agricultural land to Public Park.

- 5.2 Full Council resolved in April 2018 to purchase the land from the Crown Estate. The Council completed the land purchase in November 2018. The land will be brought into tripartite ownership with Cheddon Fitzpaine and West Monkton Parish Councils shortly. The Parish Councils have resolved to contribute to the land purchase costs and maintain the Park in the future.
- 5.3 More than 1,600 trees have been planted in the Park by volunteers. These trees will form part of the Somerset Wood, a County Council initiative to commemorate the fallen from Somerset from the Great War. A ceremony to mark the dedication of the Memorial Wood was held in November last year. I must also pay special tribute to the great efforts of the team of volunteers who have made this possible for it to actually happen.
- 5.4 New pathways and cycle routes are planned for the land and further trees will be planted in the autumn.

Councillor John Williams