

The Great Plastics Debate

- This extremely thought-provoking debate took place on Friday, 14 September 2018 at Queen's College, Taunton. It came about because of a motion raised at the February 2018 meeting of Taunton Deane's Full Council.
- The debate event was well put together by Councillor Farbahi with the help and support of Councillor Sully and the undersigned. Queen's College was also heavily involved, and we are very grateful to Mrs Jane Evans, Director of Education, and the College management for allowing the event to be held there. The following account was kindly prepared by Councillor Andrew Sully:-

"Taunton Deane Borough Council passed a resolution at its Full Council meeting on 22 February 2018 aimed at phasing out the use of single-use plastics. Councillors have been looking to facilitate further initiatives that would help shape the environment we would wish to live in and reduce the impact of plastics on our health and wellbeing. Some of the South West's leading minds came together on Friday, 14 September 2018 to take part in the Great Plastics Debate at Queen's College also attended by members of the public. The conference brought together world leading specialists in one room to discuss an issue that has particularly high salience now.

This conference related to the effects of plastics on our fragile environment and the possible innovative solutions that could help tackle this modern-day scourge. The knowledgeable panellists discussed matters relating to single-use plastics, the circular economy and health and wellbeing in Somerset, as well as the town's drive to be leading researchers on the subjects.

The panellists were Nick Bryant, Head of Strategy for Taunton Deane Borough Council, Jim Claydon, past President of the Royal Town Planning Institute, Natasha Bradshaw, for South West Marine Ecosystems, Koorosh Khodabandahloo, a Professor from the University of Southern Queensland, Dr Stuart Monk, from South West Academic Health Science, Mickey Howard, a Professor from the University of Exeter, and Owen Pask, Assistant Director for Norr Consultants Limited. The evening was chaired by editor of the County Gazette, Paul Jones.

Professor Mickey Howard explained the concept of the circular economy to the audience and how it can be adapted to plastics.

"We're leaving a legacy of plastics," he said, "and the quantity is expected to double in the next 20 years. 95% of the value of what we have made has been lost in the economy."

He explained how going from a 'take, make and waste' attitude, to a circular one, would recover much of the value lost in not reusing the plastic we have already created.

He added: "Where's the value in throwing things away? Burning it is better than landfill, but it is not there yet.

Professor Khodabandahloo joined Professor Howard in explaining the wasteful plastic industry.

He explained how technology to clear the oceans of plastic waste is something he is excited about, but more work needs to go into these machines to enable them to better distinguish between fish and waste. He said: "People will take notice when it hurts their pockets or their health, but the global problem is already here. We have got to make people aware."

With 90 per cent of marine wildlife having plastic inside of them, humans are already unknowingly consuming plastic. Professor Khodabandahloo said more work needs to be done to understand what this does to our health, and the health of other creatures.

Dr Stuart Monk explained how the NHS in the South West was the perfect place for research to take place. This research would bring light to understanding what plastic is doing to our bodies and would also bring funding and jobs to the area.

But, he advised, this knowledge is worthless without a plan to back it up.

Nick Bryant, Taunton Deane's Head of Strategy, said "We have got to be mindful of how decisions are made. A plan can be made, but there needs to be a mandate. We need a business case and to figure out what we want to tackle. Once we understand that and learn what it means in terms of land requirement, we can move forward and set out the route map."

Natasha Bradshaw explained how taking a small step to do something such as banning plastic straws in the town would have a huge impact, as well as increasing awareness for the issues surrounding other single-use plastics.

Jim Claydon, past President of the Royal Town Planning Institute, explained how Taunton could be the perfect place for a centre for research and innovation. He said: "Taunton has Garden Town status. This allows it to have development corporations, which can get money back into the town and make development work. We are sitting with the opportunity of a lifetime. If we want to make Taunton a special place, now is the time to do it."

He added the town's location aided its ability to make the plans work, as well as being close to a motorway junction.

Owen Pask, from Norr Consultants, who are Canada based and have over 1,000 top architects around the world. They are familiar with Integrated Project Delivery where all the stakeholders become partners.

They have a detailed plan where they address issues such as:-

- 1. Project organisation and challenges;*
- 2. Operating systems that will deliver objectives; AND*
- 3. Commercial terms binding the project participants.*

The idea around creating a Centre of Excellence for Research and Innovation in Taunton is an idea that is currently being explored by the Council's "Review of Affordable Employment Land, Task and Finish Group". The Group would like the Council to provide some funding to establish an office with dedicated staff to work with partners such as the town's surrounding universities, as well as other stakeholders, to bring the idea to fruition.

The conference provided evidence of interest and potential viability of such a concept. If developed, it is felt that this would be likely to lead to increased productivity, innovation and prosperity for the community at large.

By aspiring to become an incubator for global research and innovation, and specifically to explore how as a society we are to tackle our plastics problem would engender the Council and local businesses to adapt to the complex issue of sustainability.

A Centre for Research and Innovation for the South West, based in Taunton Deane, would be aligned with the Government's modern Industrial Strategy that sets out Grand Challenges to the UK to be at the forefront of the industries of the future. This would ensure that the UK took advantage of major global changes, improving people's lives and the country's productivity, which ties in with Taunton Deane Council's own Prosperity agenda."