

SWT Executive - 18 March 2020

Present: Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts (Chair)
Councillors Benet Allen, Chris Booth, Ross Henley, Marcus Kravis, Peter Pilkington and Francesca Smith

Officers: Marcus Prouse, Amy Tregellas, James Hassett, Andrew Pritchard, James Barra, Paul Fitzgerald, Lisa Redston, Alastair Woodland and Sally Stark

Also Present: Councillors Roger Habgood and Danny Wedderkopp

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

118. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors R Lees and M Rigby.

119. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Executive

(Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 22nd January 2020, 28th January 2020 and 10th February 2020 were circulated with the agenda)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Executive held on 22nd January, 28th January and 10th February 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

120. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr C Booth	All Items	Wellington and Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr P Pilkington	All Items	Timberscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr F Smith	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr F Smith-Roberts	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Wedderkopp	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke

Councillor D Wedderkopp declared a personal interest in relation to Item 8 – Gull Control Programme in Taunton Town Centre 2020 as he was a resident of the Town Centre where the programme would be carried out.

121. **Public Participation**

Four members of the public had requested to speak on the items on the agenda.

- A. Mr David Redgewell (South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside) submitted the following statement in relation to Taunton Bus Station and spoke at the meeting;

“This statement is to request that Taunton bus and coach station is kept open until alternative facilities are provided in Taunton town centre and the railway station including the possibility of turning the council station car park into a bus station.

We would therefore like to ask the following questions about the impact of the bus and coach station closure on public transport users in Taunton. At a recent Cabinet meeting and Full Council meeting Travel-Watch South West Railfuture Severnside south transport network and RMT and Unite the union raised the following concerns to the Council about alternative investment in interchange facilities within the town centre:

1. The need for warm due covered shelters for Castle way, the Parade and East Reach for good lighting and castle kerbs for disabled access to be built in the scheme.
2. Real-time information to be provided on the stops and seating.
3. That facilities are provided for national Express Coaches service within the town centre including road space to put down the wheelchair lift.
4. That full public consultation be carried out with public transport user group and passengers about passenger’s facilities within the town centre.
5. The RMT union be given an assurance that a canteen and radio room be provided within the town centre.
6. That the bus and coach station would not close until a better interchange in the town centre had been provided.
7. Because of the proposed allocation for the site to be developed for a leisure complex and upmarket waterfront housing Somerset West and Taunton council owning half the bus station site already some of the development money should be re-invested in a bus interchange in the town centre. At present no consultation meeting have taken place since though council meetings.

Which a very congested town centre and poor air quality plus the climate change emergency and the need to close the centre of town to the private car. We would welcome progress on improving the bus service network and infrastructure other than the park and ride service which we welcome your support for.

In the South West government money is being invested in new bus interchanges at Gloucester, Exeter, and Weston super mare new bus interchange near Tesco with first group bus, national Express and stagecoach west. New facilities in Bus stations in Truro, Penzance, St Ives and Newquay in Cornwall by the DFT

and Cornwall Council and first group. With a new bus rail interchange at Weymouth town and Dorchester south stations.

Whilst we welcome the transport interchange at Taunton railway station it's not big enough to operate the country bus service that use the bus station now just the west Somerset service and two others. At a time when there is a lot of government grant available via Somerset county council the transport authority from the Central government department for transport we wonder why no bid has been put in for a bus interchange by Somerset county council and SWT council. The south west transport board can also push the case for regional bus and coach stations.

We hope the council will now meet will public transport user groups and transport focus who have a guide to passenger disruption to find a way forward with the bus operator and the transport unions. In view of no new passenger's facilities being built to consign a further lease to first group until new interchange facilities are available please see guidelines from transport focus on disruption to passengers during relocation of the bus and coach stations.”

The Leader of the Council thanked Mr Redgewell for his questions and comments. Planning and Transport fell under Cllr Rigby's Portfolio and sadly he was not able to be at the meeting. The Leader appreciated Mr Redgewell concerns and would ensure a written response was provided. The decision to close the Bus Station had been a commercial decision by First the operator and Somerset County Council was the relevant Transport authority. SWT took Transport seriously and looked to make things better, the Park and Ride being one such example.

Councillor Ross Henley added that he was registered as disabled and covered under the Equalities Act 2010 and agreed with many of the points Mr Redgewell had made. There had been an appalling lack of communication by First, and as quite rightly pointed out this was not a decision taken by SWT and the transport authority was the County Council. He was very disappointed that Scrutiny had not brought in First as recommended by himself and others. People with his own disability do not like change and clarity about where going with sudden moves may cause immense stress. There is huge concern in the community regarding this and First have a number of questions to answer, and they have not discharged their responsibilities to their users effectively.

B. Mr Alan Debenham asked the following questions;

“1. With reference to the big debacle costing millions in wasted public funds and loss of operational performance regarding last year's amalgamation of the two councils to form Somerset West and Taunton Council, and, in the light of the recent South West Auditor's report to this council's Audit Committee, surely there should follow some severe actions of redress in terms of direct monetary compensation retrieved from the Ignite management consultancy AND possible surcharges imposed upon Councillors/Officers held responsible, plus possible partial retrieval of some extraordinary benefits paid to top officers? Has anything happened along these lines and if not, why not??

2. To hear PM Johnson's and Chancellor Sunak's Commons' blather recently concerning the Budget and the coming delayed summer Comprehensive Spending Review, you'd think the "get it done" Brexit golden age of fantastic new opportunities was with us, instead we witness the opposite :-

- continued tight Local Government austerity despite big 4% Council Tax rise yet again, and no attempt to restore any services previously butchered - fundamental review of unfair Council Tax, based on 1991 valuations, is needed and full local Council control through the Layfield Royal Commission's proposals for local income and sales taxes, plus latest campaign for site and land value taxes;
- virtually no significant extra bus, bike, and rail investments yet, despite jocular Johnson's recent extra £5.5bn centrally pledged support - maybe (?) re-instate recent savage cuts to local routes and timetables, and review of old Beeching cuts to include new Wellington station ;
- nebulous promise of 20,000 extra police on the beat met by 137 last year for Avon & Somerset and probably the same this year, but paid for largely by 10% increase in police Council Tax levy last year and another extra 4% this year ;
- Road potholes and roadside waste dumping still forever growing;
- promises tackling climate emergency still much more Johnson fantasy, particularly related to recent storms and flood prevention, and urgent need for an end to GDP/economic growth with a planned and financially fair recession with any new development only allowed which is tied to this (so says Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion) ;

What are the Council's responses to these statements and, in the light of the Budget, what alterations are the Council going to have to make to its now agreed 2020-21 budget in terms of possible shortfalls in Business Rate funds and extra funds, or loan allocations for Housing and Homelessness??”

The Leader of the Council thanked Mr Debenham for his questions and stated that the Transformation Audit report would be debated later on the Agenda and that would shape where the Council went from there. In relation to the Budget and Chancellor Sunak's priorities.

For the present and the future, Covid-19 would change a lot in the ways of working and as a Council we are going to prioritise the most vulnerable and change some of the funding streams and hopefully the Council would get the reimbursement and support for Business Rates etc. In regards to where are we if that wasn't happening, we had set a balanced budget for 20/21 and we are looking to do more in the community where we hadn't cut services, but Covid-19 had now taken over and the approach to tackling that was day by day.

C. Ms Bryony Chetwode submitted the following questions in relation to Taunton Bus Station;

“Following an intense period of online speculation, we are led to understand that vacant possession of the Bus Station is expected by March 27th. Assuming this to be correct, TravelWatch SouthWest is concerned that the uncertainty over passenger provision risks damage to existing bus patronage which the community can ill afford.

A statement to address to online concerns would be helpful, as although I understand the points around privacy of contract on the sale of property, I am concerned that the duties of care whether legal or moral are being seen to be overlooked. It would be helpful to stakeholders, if the Council was to:

1. Release a statement addressing concerns around disabled access,
2. Answer concerns around provisions of shelter and other items/services previously requested by TWSW and User Groups.
3. Provide a timetable for the proposed changes to access to services
4. Give an indication of how future bus provision will be developed in the town and plans being brought forward
5. Describe how SWAT plan to engage with the Stakeholder community over the decisions around their facilities and services

It would be my hope that this could provide some certainty from which we could work together in the interest of passengers with the local Highways, SCC and SWAT to help people navigate on what may in the worst case scenario be a very short available timescale.

I must add that, there are clear and straight forward guidelines provided by Transport Focus during changes to bus stop placement and it will be a challenge for all concerned to meet these. And, we need to hear formally if there is an opportunity for a short-term extension/license for First to occupy the bus station during the adjustment preparation. It is worth noting that quick action could propel Community engagement which would assist a bid for infrastructure funding and TravelWatch SouthWest supports park and ride improvements funded via parking charge increases in the centre of town.

Could the Committee explore this and come back to TravelWatch SouthWest?”

The Leader of the Council stated that a written response would be provided as Councillor Mike Rigby who had overall responsibility for Transport was not present. The Leader reiterated that First Group had made the decision to close the bus station not SWT Council.

D. Mr Nigel Behan asked the following questions in relation to Taunton Bus Station;

“The Future of Taunton Bus & Coach Station

This statement and questions relate to the pending closure of a vital Public and Social Space and Asset.

Presumably Equality Impact Assessments, Environmental (Air quality and pollutants etc.) Impact Assessments have been produced, if so please can you point out where they are?

Since SWT are not the primary Council for Public Transport (but certainly are a significant stakeholder in the bus station) what “pressure” and “persuasion” has SWT applied to Somerset County Council and the Department for Transport (and regional bodies) to replace and improve the facilities for the public and the frequency of buses and coaches at the existing (an upgraded replacement) Bus and Coach Station?

Will you release (publish) the correspondence (emails etc.) between SWT, DfT, SCC, First and National Express, Network Rail and GWR that relates to the closure (and replacement) of the Bus Station (and provide a list of all the correspondence)?”

The Leader of the Council stated that a written response would be provided as Councillor Mike Rigby who had overall responsibility for Transport was not present.

122. **Executive Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Executive Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Councillor Francesca Smith asked if there was confidence the items on the Forward Plan could be delivered in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic?

James Hassett (Chief Executive) responded that he was not. Officers had undertaken a process of identifying key services to keep the Council operating and prioritising keeping people safe and well. There would be an incredible pressure on the organisation, and there may be requests from the wider public sector family such as the NHS and County Council, and that help would be willingly given. The list of those services would be distributed shortly. Overall, there were items that would be delayed due to the pandemic’s effects.

RESOLVED that the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

123. **Approval of the Annual Pay Policy Statement 2020/2021**

Executive Councillor Ross Henley, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources introduced the report and moved the recommendations, which sought approval of the Pay Policy Statement 2020/21 and its recommendation to Full Council.

Section 38 (1) of the Localism Act 2011 required local authorities to prepare and publish a pay policy statement for each financial year, approved by Full Council. He wished to draw attention to the Council’s recognising of the Living Wage Foundation and that we took our responsibilities seriously under the national

minimum wage requirements. He was really pleased that nobody in the organisation was paid less than £9.74. Once we were through Covid-19 the Council could be in a position to challenge its suppliers and contractors to follow suit, with SWT being an exemplar to other organisations.

The Leader echoed Cllr Henley's comments and was really pleased everyone in the organisation was above the National Living Wage and SWT would be looking at accreditation.

RESOLVED that the Executive recommend to Full Council that the Pay Policy Statement 2020/21 is approved for publication.

124. **HPC Planning Obligations Board (POB) - Recommendation to transfer balance of ring-fenced Community Impact Mitigation Funding (CIM)**

Executive Councillor Chris Booth, Portfolio Holder for Community introduced the report and moved the recommendations, which sought to present the recommendations of the Hinkley Point C (HPC) Planning Obligations Board, for the transfer of ring-fenced monies £158,994 for Cannington from the HPC CIM Fund to Cannington Parish Council. The report also presented recommendations of the HPC Planning Obligations Board for the allocation of £201,545 from the HPC CIM Fund ring-fenced for Stogursey to Stogursey Victory Hall Committee for use as contingency for the Stogursey Victory Hall Project, with any unspent contingency to be returned to the HPC CIM Fund ring-fenced for Stogursey in July 2020.

Councillor Kravis congratulated the Portfolio Holder and the officers for picking the issue up and running with it, and putting the work into make sure the effects of HPC were mitigated.

RESOLVED that the Executive endorsed the recommendation made by the Hinkley Point C Planning Obligations Board (POB) as follows;

1. To approve the transfer of ring-fenced monies £158,994 for Cannington from the HPC CIM Fund to Cannington Parish Council (CPC) with the following conditions set out in a Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by Cannington Parish Council:
 - a) CPC must undertake evaluation appraisals of all proposals to ensure they mitigate impacts in line with the criteria set out in Schedule 1 of the HPC Site Preparation Section 106 agreement before approval.
 - b) CPC must report back to Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWT) via the CIM Fund Manager at regular intervals with progress updates.
 - c) Applications for grant funding of over £50,000 must be referred to SWT and follow the decision making procedures set out in the HPC Site Preparation Section 106 agreement to SWT for consideration by POB and SWT in line with obligations within the HPC Site Preparation Section 106 agreement.
 - d) Applications for grant funding by any organisation that have previously been awarded a CIM Fund Grant must be referred to SWT and follow the

decision making procedures set out in the HPC Site Preparation Section 106 agreement.

2. To allocate £201,545 from the HPC CIM Fund ring-fenced for Stogursey to Stogursey Victory Hall Committee for use as contingency for the Stogursey Victory Hall Project, with any unspent contingency to be returned to the HPC CIM Fund ring-fenced for Stogursey in July 2020.

125. **Gull Control Programme in Taunton Town Centre 2020**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and moved the recommendations, which sought support to implement a gull control programme in Taunton Town Centre during the 2020 gull breeding season.

Discussion took place on;

- The noise was just one element of the nuisance, seagulls could also be quite aggressive and attack people for food.
- Councillors had seen the replacement eggs at a Member Briefing which had been impressive and were delighted steps were being taken to control seagulls.
- Similar methods had been undertaken in an industrial estate in West Somerset which had proven effective.
- A query was raised as to whether this work could be undertaken in light of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- *The intention was to still proceed this year.*
- The problem had become noticeable to people outside of the District and the mess they created was unsightly.
- It was requested that replacement bins had lids put them on to stop the birds pulling out the waste, particularly in the parks.
- Councillor D Wedderkopp was a resident of the town centre and felt the situation had gotten out of control. He had raised the issue previously but had been told they were a protected species and there was nothing that could be done.
- The Leader thanked Councillor Wedderkopp for his comments and clarified that the Council had obtained the relevant licenses to enable this work to be undertaken as they were still protected species. It was felt to be the most humane way to limit their impact, which the Council received a lot of complaints about.

RESOLVED to implement a gull control programme in Taunton Town Centre to reduce the associated noise nuisance and aggressive behaviour along with long-term population reduction.

126. **South West Audit Partnership Transformation Audit - Lessons Learnt**

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts introduced the report. Councillor Rigby had been leading on this report but was unavailable this evening. This report had completed by the South West and Audit Partnership and

had been taken to a Joint Committee of the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee and the Scrutiny Committee where it had had a lengthy discussion. There had been nine areas identified in the report and the Leader wished to discuss how we moved forward from this point.

Discussion took place around:

- It was broadly felt the report was damning. It exonerated any Council officers involved in this process as Officers advised and it was clear that potential risks of the project had been highlighted, and sadly the worst scenarios were realised.
- It was stated that the previous political leadership from the last administration should be ashamed as to how this had ballooned out of control.
- The report alluded that as so many staff left and the costs spiralled, that meant the new council came into being and had to employ more staff to fill the holes that had been left.
- It was commented that when undertaking a transformation programme such as this risk management must be carried out, which appeared it was not. The Voluntary Redundancy Scheme for all employees was proceeded with without knowing the ultimate effect. The impact was clear and the Council still had a way to go to return. It was hoped nothing like this ever happened again.
- It was commented that the report was very clearly laid out as to what happened, with programmes and projects not delivered as intended. The Council had lost a vast amount of knowledge at great cost.
- Concern was raised over the lack of documentation throughout the process. By December 2018 an extra two million pounds was requested for further redundancy costs which should have been at that point a catalyst for a change in direction.
- Officers were commended for their hard work in dealing with the results of this. It was clear this was a political decision.
- Some Councillors had been against the merger from the beginning of the process. It was hoped this would serve as a lesson that before there were any further future attempts at mergers, collaborations or transformations in Somerset that it is looked at from a wider perspective than a political one.
- Comment was made that in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic the proposals around a unitary council for Somerset were a distraction and should be withdrawn.
- Some of the comments were felt to be political and it was commented that some Councillors had a misunderstanding of what Transformation was and that it had been misrepresented. The report was considered light, but it was recognised there was a need to move on and move forward. The consultation and the cross-party groups such as JPAG had been forgotten. The Council was urged not re-implement the silos that existed previously and a query was raised as to what the new Transformation programme was of the new administration. All Councillors would look to move forward and work towards making this Council one of the best in the country if possible.
- It was commented that the report was produced by independent auditors and they should not be questioned as to their conclusions.

The Leader had dealt with the after-effects of the Transformation and the points within the report for the past ten months since taking over the administration. The mistakes catalogued must never be repeated again and this report must be learnt from. There would always be a need for the organisation to improve going forward. The Council had had to drastically improve over the last ten months as many of the projects were not completed, despite spending an obscene amount of money. The Council would still need to invest in IT and its services. It was frustrating that Councillors had asked for information at the time but it was not given. Somerset West and Taunton needed to be open, transparent and honest especially to Councillors when questions were raised. It was a credit to officers that we had a balanced budget and were still able to provide statutory services and additional funding to e.g. the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Brewhouse. Transformation was not over but the previous administration's version of Transformation was, SWT still needed to run an efficient organisation with great IT to enable people to self-serve and would not be looking to stand still.

RESOLVED that the Executive noted the South West Audit Partnership's (SWAP) Transformation Audit - Lessons Learnt Report.

127. **Access to Information - Exclusion of the Press and Public**

RESOLVED that the press and the public be excluded from the meeting for the items numbered 11 on the Agenda as the items contained exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A 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.

128. **Confidential Report - Disposal of HRA Asset**

Executive Councillor Francesca Smith, Portfolio Holder for Housing Services introduced the confidential report.

RESOLVED that Executive;

1. Approved the sale of the freehold interest in the property identified in the confidential report for a confidential sum.
2. Delegated authority to the Assets Specialist in consultation with the S151 Officer to agree final terms and complete the sale transaction.
3. Noted the income from the disposal would be credited to the Capital Receipts Reserve within the Housing Revenue Account.

(The Meeting ended at 7.21 pm)

