

SWT Executive - 16 December 2020

Present: Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts (Chair)

Councillors Benet Allen, Chris Booth, Ross Henley, Marcus Kravis, Richard Lees, Peter Pilkington, Mike Rigby, Francesca Smith and Sarah Wakefield

Officers: James Hasset, Dawn Adey, James Barra, Alison North, Andrew Pritchard, Tracey Meadows (Democracy and Governance), Clare Rendell, Amy Tregellas and Richard Burge

Also Present: Councillors Ian Aldridge, Norman Cavill, Caroline Ellis, Habib Farbahi, Libby Lisgo, Janet Lloyd, Dave Mansell, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Andrew Sully, Anthony Trollope-Bellew, Ray Tully, Loretta Whetlor and Gwil Wren

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

73. Apologies

No apologies were received.

74. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Executive

(Minutes of the meetings of the Executive held on 20 October 2020, 21 October 2020, 28 October 2020 and 18 November 2020 circulated with the agenda)

Councillor S Wakefield gave amended wording on an item in the minutes for the meeting held on 20 October 2020 and highlighted an error in her declaration of interest for the meeting held on 28 October 2020.

Resolved that the minutes of the Executive held on 20 October 2020, 21 October 2020, 28 October 2020 and 18 November 2020, with amendments, be confirmed as a correct record.

75. 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 N Cavill	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke
Cllr C Ellis	All Items	Taunton Charter	Personal	Spoke

		Trustee		
Cllr R Lees	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke
Cllr J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington & Sampford Arundel	Personal	Spoke
Cllr D Mansell	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke
Cllr P Pilkington	All Items	Timberscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Rigby	All Items	SCC & Bishops Lydeard	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 V Stock-Williams	All Items	Wellington	Personal	Spoke
Cllr R Tully	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke
Cllr G Wren	All Items	Clerk to Milverton PC	Personal	Spoke

76. Public Participation

Lori Busch, submitted a statement on agenda item 9, Extension of Public Space at Belvedere Road:

I would like to ask just what exactly Councillor Kravis meant at the Scrutiny Committee Meeting by his statement “If we look at who the tenants were...” I represent a national charity supporting victims of domestic abuse. We chose to base our national charity in Taunton, employing Somerset staff and the only statutory funding we received was the charity rate relief thanks to the Taunton councillors who supported our application.

As a tenant of Flook House, a building of significant historic importance dating back well into the 1700’s with features such as a first floor over mantle dating back to 1652 documented in books, I wished to formally object to the proposed demolition of this historic asset and the implications of combining it with a toilet block to just cast its history aside.

Flook House was mentioned in historical documents stating that John Trenchard MP resided there during the election of 1715. It was where he wrote “The Whig” and it was the site of many weddings, and registrations of births and deaths while it was the registry office. I have also had people mention to me their fond memories of the 1960’s when they used to have their school lunches there while attending North Town School. It surprised me that this historic building was not listed.

It amazed me that Flook House survived the historic floods of 1889 and 1960, only to be cast aside by a council which presented itself to the population of

Taunton as being the party of the people with their party stance being a greener, fairer, more caring Britain.

I believed the presentation to support the demolition of Flook House was also not representative of its importance to the history of the area where it was mentioned as a "chief residence". The idea that it was the cause of the anti-social behaviour was ridiculous and the proposed plans and costs to bring it up to modern standards were outrageous for an historic premises. As for the lack of tenants, most of the others were on a licence with 30 days' notice which was not enough to get a BT line moved during Covid so I could understand their wish to have a tenancy with a bit more security.

Another counsellor stated that the roof had already been done a few years ago, the boiler was replaced within the last 5 years for the heating and I witnessed several years ago ties between the ground and first floor being installed that were modern ties which did not show from the exterior. For a building that was approximately 500 years old, I think it looked very good.

There was a public expectation that those impacted would be involved in the process however it appeared that this had been pushed through during lockdown with no public scrutiny or tenant involvement. This made myself personally and the members, employees and trustees of charity feel that we had been disenfranchised from the democratic process.

Since this council was voted in in 2019, it appeared that it was happy to wilfully let historic buildings fall into disrepair through lack of maintenance and then vote to demolish them, removing yet another part of Taunton's history.

I have yet to have any direct contact from Councillor Marcus Kravis, portfolio holder for economic development. The contact I had received from one of his contractors was to apologise for the fact that I heard about it from the press. I wished to thank the Scrutiny Committee for allowing me to be heard despite not having proper notice of some members of the council's intention to push this through Executive Committee and for their unanimous decision to request that it go to a Full Council meeting for a decision.

Yours sincerely, Lori Busch, Charity Manager, The ManKind Initiative

The Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development acknowledged the letter.

77. **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.

Resolved that the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

78. **Corporate Performance Report, Quarter 2, 2020-21**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors acknowledged that although there was still work to be done on the Freedom of Information Requests and Complaints, that officers had done great work to improve the figures on performance.
- Councillors requested an update on the Wild Meadow mentioned on page 47 of the report.
The Portfolio Holder for Climate Change advised that the work required on the Wild Meadow was seasonal and would start in 2021.
- Councillors were pleased to see the progress made on items included in the appendices.
- Councillors requested whether the performance indicator for ‘% of minor planning applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed extension of time’ be split into two indicators, as by combining them, it gave false figures for each indicator.
The Business Intelligence and Performance Manager advised that they were currently working on many suggestions made by the Scrutiny Committee and would feed back with an update in the New Year. He also advised that the title was from a historic list that was guided by national performance indicator wording.
- Councillors were pleased to see how the Council had adapted through the Covid Pandemic and continue to serve the community.
- Councillors admitted there was always room for improvement and that they would continue to strive for higher targets.
- Councillors were pleased to see delivery on the Corporate Plan.
- Councillors were pleased to see officer’s high performance since Transformation.
- Councillors thanked all officers for their hard work over the last year.

Resolved that the Executive were asked to consider the attached performance report.

79. **2020-21 Financial Monitoring as at Quarter 2 (30 September 2020)**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors requested that officers included in the report that the reduction of parking revenue was partly due to the free parking introduced during the national lockdown but also that there would have been a reduction anyway due to the lockdown and that the shops were closed and residents were told not to travel if it wasn’t necessary.
The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources agreed and believed it was the correct decision at the time.
- Councillors agreed that the decision to offer free parking during the lockdown was made with the best of intentions, but that it became counterproductive at the end of the lockdown. This was because the car parks ended up being used by workers, who parked up all day and meant that shoppers were unable to return to the towns as there was nowhere to park.
- Councillors requested clarification on the figures in table one of the report and queried whether the £5,470,000 was the amount of funding the Council received or whether that was the amount given to the Council to give as grant payments to assist businesses.

The Lead Finance Business Partner and Deputy S151 Officer confirmed it was the grant funding that the Council received to assist with any loss of income incurred during the Covid Pandemic.

- Councillors were interested to see what the total amount of funding given to the Council would be at the end of the financial year.
- Councillors highlighted that the report showed how the Covid Pandemic had impacted on the Council's finances. The budget would need to be reviewed to ensure that it was balanced and to enable the Council to continue to provide services.

Resolved that the Executive reviewed and noted the Council's forecast financial performance and projected reserves position for 2020/21 financial year as at 30 September 2020.

80. **Review of Voluntary and Community Sector Grants**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- Councillors were pleased to see the review taking place and queried whether the work would be completed by 2022.
The Portfolio Holder for Community hoped to get the working group in place for the financial year of 2022.
- Councillors requested an update on the funds given out through the Community Chest.
The Community Resilience Manager advised that the total amount of funding was £250,000 and that £167,000 of that had been approved and paid out to 47 different organisations over the past couple of months.
- Councillors were pleased to see a working group being set up to assist with the review.
- Concern was raised on the Advice Bureaus in the area. Councillors were aware that the amount of contact made to the Advice Bureaus had decreased during the Covid Pandemic and that when they reopened for face-to-face appointments that they would need extra support, as they were expecting a sharp increase of contact due to residents not being able to take up the offer of virtual appointments.
The Community Resilience Manager advised that he had met with the Advice Bureaus in Minehead and Taunton and that they expected a backlog when they reopened as they had not been able to assist everyone with virtual appointments. He had asked them to outline what assistance they might need in the future so that the Council could look at what future support could be given.
- Councillors agreed that the Advice Bureaus carried out fantastic work in the community.
- Councillors requested clarification on the figures stated on the funding from Spark.
The Community Resilience Manager advised that the figures stated were historically split between the former Taunton Deane and West Somerset areas and would be amalgamated into one for future reports.
- Concern was raised that the smaller organisations relied upon the grant payments given from the Council and that if those stopped, it could have a

fundamental impact on the organisations and mean that they were not able to continue to support the community.

The Portfolio Holder for Community advised that they were using due diligence at this point to ensure that the Council could continue to assist those organisations but also highlighted other options available for them to apply for grant payments, such as the Community Chest.

Resolved that the Executive approved:-

- 1) To maintain current levels of funding for the final year of the current agreement to end in March 2022; and
- 2) A cross party Members Working Group was established to work with officers to ensure that clear funding criteria were in place for future work with the Voluntary and Community Sector beyond March 2022.

81. **Extension of Public Space at Belvedere Road**

During the discussion, the following points were raised:-

- The Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development withdrew the recommendations from the report and proposed two new recommendations, as follows:-
 - 1) The creation of a cross party working group to consider the options available for Flook House and the surrounding area. With a recommendation from this group being presented to Executive committee on the 21 April 2021; and
 - 2) That delegated authority be granted to the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management, along with the Director for External Operations and Climate Change to appoint Members to the working group and to agree the terms of reference for that group.
- The recommendations were accepted by Councillor M Rigby, the seconder of the report.
- Councillors agreed that it was a difficult decision to make and were pleased to see a working group being set up to assist with the decision making.
- Concern was raised on the amount of money that would be needed to refurbish the building and bring it back up to standard as it had deteriorated over the years.
- Councillors were pleased to see the new recommendations as there had been a lot of public interest in the building and they needed to ensure they investigated all the possible options for the building and space.
- Councillors suggested the building was sadly in the wrong location and they hoped that a good solution could be found as the building was not listed.
- Councillors agreed that they did not want the land or building to be sold and wanted to keep it as an asset.
- Councillors agreed it was a controversial decision and that they needed to be mindful of the future costs if the Council continued to support the building.
- Councillors suggested that the office space should be promoted as the building was in a good location for the town.

- Councillors suggested the building was given to the town/borough for the Mayor to use for their civic duties.
- Councillors requested that the final decision on the building and space be made by Full Council.
- The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee gave a summary of the points made when the report was debated by the Committee.
- Councillors suggested that the Working Group should look into options given by the Zero Carbon Forum.
- Councillors were pleased that the Executive had taken on board the comments made by the Scrutiny Committee.
- Councillors suggested a public consultation should be carried out on the different options for the building/space.
- The Portfolio Holder for Asset Management and Economic Development thanked all the Councillors for their comments and would take them on board as part of the Working Group research. He agreed that the timeline was short but that he wanted a decision to be made.

Resolved that the Executive approved the following:-

- 1) The creation of a cross party working group to consider the options available for Flook House and the surrounding area. With a recommendation from this group being presented to Executive committee on the 21 April 2021; and
- 2) That delegated authority be granted to the Portfolio Holder for Asset Management, along with the Director for External Operations and Climate Change to appoint Members to the working group and to agree the terms of reference for that group.

The Leader of the Council and Executive wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

(The Meeting ended at 7.50 pm)