

SWT Community Scrutiny Committee - 30 June 2021

Present: Councillor Libby Lisgo (Chair)

Councillors Dave Mansell, Simon Coles, John Hunt, Dawn Johnson, Richard Lees, Mark Lithgow, Janet Lloyd, Andy Milne, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Andy Pritchard, Vivienne Stock-Williams, Sarah Wakefield and John Hassall

Officers: Andrew Randell, Marcus Prouse, Chris Hall, Andrew Pritchard and Tracey Meadows

Also Present: Councillors Marcus Kravis, Derek Perry, Mike Rigby, Nick Thwaites and Brenda Weston

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

10. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Trollope-Bellew, Tully and Durdan.

Councillors Thwaites, Hassall and Whetlor attended as substitutes.

Councillors Ellis, Darch, Sully and Tully attended remotely

Stuart Noyce attended remotely.

11. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee held on 30 June 2021.

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2021 were approved.

12. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Pilkington and Prior Sankey made declarations of personal interest having known Lori Busch who was attending the meeting to make a statement under Public Question Time.

13. Public Participation

The following statement from Lori Busch was read out on behalf of the Mankind initiative:-

I would like to thank the scrutiny committee for once again considering the issue of the historic property Flook House. I am grateful that the strong feelings of the scrutiny committee members in December have led to the development of a working committee which has put forward other options for the building.

It is unfortunate that the timing of the formation of the committee meant that it missed the deadline for some funding that could have been very useful.

I represent a national charity supporting victims of domestic abuse. We choose to base our national charity in Taunton, employing Somerset staff and the only statutory funding we receive is the charity rate relief thanks to the Taunton councillors who support 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 overmantle dating back to 1652 documented in books, I wish to once again put on record my formal objection to the proposal for demolition of this historic asset and the implications of combining it with a toilet block to just cast its history aside. It is an insult to the building, the Town and the residents to put the worth of this historic building with a toilet block in your plans .

Flook House is 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 still surprises me that this historic building is not listed.

It is amazing that this lovely "quirky" (a word used by a member of the December 2020 scrutiny committee) building of significant historic interest that is over 300 years old survived the historic floods of 1889 and 1960, only for a proposal for it to put forward in December of 2020 for it to be bulldozed and grassed over. I am new to Taunton, having only lived here for 19 years, but this building is older than my birth country, Canada and I am disappointed that its history is seemingly so undervalued.

I do believe there are other options for this building of significant historical interest that should be explored and am pleased to see in the report that the tenants have the ability to extend their leases to give them some security and the council the security of the income. It is unfortunate that this decision comes after two of the other tenants departed due to the insecurity.

I am pleased to have the support of some of the councillors regarding the future of the building. I have also had discussions with a councillor about how public access could be facilitated to areas such as the former marriage room and am happy to have those same discussions with others should they wish to contact me for my views.

I do however disagree with section 9.1 which states "There are community safety and antisocial behaviour issues that occur in and around the property. " There are to my knowledge no community safety or anti-social behaviour issues that occur in the property. The issues in the grounds around Flook House are not caused by the building and to intimate that the removal of the building would solve them is false. No one that I am aware of objects to the demolition of the decommissioned toilet block and the proper maintenance and lowering of the raised flower beds would remove a lot of the unacceptable behaviour that goes on within them.

I wish to again thank the Scrutiny Committee for allowing me to be heard on this important issue of a building of cultural and heritage significance.

14. **Community Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

Following an update the recommendation tracker was noted.

15. **Community Scrutiny Forward Plan**

A request was made for an item of the Unitary Council to be added to the forward plan once a decision had been made.

The Community Scrutiny Forward Plan was noted.

16. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plans**

The Executive and Full Council Forward Plans were noted.

17. **Future of Flook House, Belvedere Road**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report

The report of the Member Working Group which was created by the Executive to consider options for Flook House, it provides feedback on their considerations and puts forward a recommendation to progress these further.

Following on from the report to Executive in December 2020 the portfolio holder agreed to set up a Member Working Group (MWG) to consider the future of Flook House and the immediate surrounding area. During this time expenditure on compliance matters has continued.

The report does not make a specific, costed recommendation, instead it identifies preferences from the Member Working Group. A key recommendation being to retain the Flook House building, this is a significant diversion from the previous report.

The MWG had no budget to engage specialists or architects and this has hampered their ability to create a shortlist of costed options.

A number of decisions we made by the portfolio holder during the term of the group, these include a decision to demolish the old toilet block, and a decision to offer up lease extension of up to 12 months for new or existing tenants that don't currently claim a protected status.

Considerable discussion on the future of the Flook House building was held at Scrutiny and Executive committees with a Member Working Group being created as a result. The challenge faced by the group was to consider the future of the building and the immediate surrounding area against the backdrop of rising capital costs, the maintenance needs of the building and reducing tenancies and therefore income. The original report was brought at a time when a decision was needed to invest £22,000 on compliance works. These compliance works had now been commissioned.

As a result of the pandemic and the closure of Somerset West and Taunton Council offices, the parts of the building used by SWT had been empty throughout lockdown. At the same time improved technology had been implemented for employees making the transition away from that space for the Council's own requirements easier.

The group set out to establish how the building might be used to increase income and make it self-financing. Whilst there are many options for the space the ability to make it self financing are reduced by the standard of that space and the costs of operating within a building of that age. Tenants paid a below market rate for their space and future tenancies are unlikely to change that position.

There had been government grant opportunities for public buildings over the time of the groups operation, however it was not considered that Flook House met the criteria for these grants. Whilst the building was in public ownership was not a publicly accessible building, and to make it one for the purposes of the grant would be difficult and pose issues for existing tenants.

The group established early on that they wished to see the Council retain Flook House and in order to do so there would need to establish other income streams within the surrounding land (although this isn't necessarily the only option) to fund both the capital improvements and the revenue costs.

The high level options for Flook House considered by the group were: Demolish – not supported
Dispose – not supported
Convert for housing – not supported due to complexities of the building
Continue to let – supported

The preference to continue to let Flook House was supported on the basis that the group wanted to keep the building and the other options to do so would be difficult and costly to implement. There was considerable discussion regarding the use types sought, and the tenants and tenancies that would be preferred as there are a range of options including the current use types through to a community hub, Town Council offices, art gallery / studio space, etc. It would be for the portfolio holder with the views of the MWG to consider the uses of the Flook House space based on the interest received.

The group recognised that further work would be needed to establish which uses would bring value to the Council in terms of social benefit as well as finance. Marketing of the space would also be needed to establish the demand and assess income expectations for the Council. It was decided that lease extension and new leases would be offered whilst a more in depth review is carried out as per the recommendations. It is for this reason that short term leases and extension are to be offered whilst a further review is underway.

Members of the group identified that financial support may best be achieved by developing the land around Flook House for housing. The budget requested would allow officers, with the ongoing support of the group, to engage architects and take pre planning advice on the type and density of scheme that might be supported. Without this information it is difficult to establish likely construction cost and resale values to cover the capital works, or rental values to cover the ongoing revenue costs of Flook House.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Whilst the building had some historical significance, it was in doubt that the Council could afford the ongoing maintenance, let alone the cost of a full refurbish or refitting of the building. It was considered that there was sufficient space at The Deane House which could be let out to the charities who were the existing tenants at Flook House.
- Value for money for taxpayers needed to be taken into account in respect of the future uses of the building.
- Keeping the building was thought to be worthwhile and keeping it for its historic value and restoring it had some support from committee members.
- Full costings needed to be drawn up to understand what the ongoing liability would be to preserve it for future use. It was recognised whatever solution there were costs involved.
- It was questioned if the recommendations were those of the working group, it was confirmed that they were supported by the working group and endorsed by the Portfolio Holder.

- Developing the surrounding area of the building as part of any solution was supported.
- It was questioned what type of housing was considered for the building.
- Bringing it back to a reasonable standard for the required capital work to ensure that its fit for use was encouraged, the capital sum was considered a reasonable amount.
- The survey costs would be included in the £125k. This would form part of the budget setting process and resource allocation process.
- Retaining the building was the popular view from elected members, although there had been no consensus reached in relation to the future use of the building.
- Concern was expressed over the makeup of the working group and lack of officer involvement along with Portfolio Holder involvement.
- The working group was a mix of Councillors from all parties with the membership provided to the committee.
- It was questioned what parcel of land across Flook House was included.
- The feasibility study considered developing the area, not the internal works addressing the building.
- The challenges the member working group tackled was the area surrounding the building and not just the future of the building itself.
- Exploring the idea of a foyer housing project was encouraged in enabling young people secure supported housing.
- YMCA could bid for financial support from Homes England which was worth investigating and considering.
- The historic and heritage value was reiterated, better short term use was encouraged with the potential for better public use. Decarbonisation funds could be applied for and help secure its long term future for the community.
- It was recognised there could be a range of future uses to save the building.
- It was questioned if the rent would cover the yearly maintenance of the building.
- Future use of the building and site would be part of the feasibility study.

Community Scrutiny supported the following recommendations proposed by the Working Group to the Executive:-

1. That the Executive retain Flook House for its historical interest and potential future social value.
2. That the Executive establish a new project as part of the business planning process for 2022/23. Taking forward the feasibility works for potential development of the area including the retention of Flook House as part of the longer term solution.
3. That Executive support a new budget of £125,000 as part of the business planning process for 2022/23 to provide project management resource, engage architects, and the other necessary specialists to produce a costed business case.
4. That Executive continue the Member Working Group to support the project and Portfolio Holder, if 2 and 3 are approved.

18. **Verbal Update - Executive Cllr PFH Session - Cllr Derek Perry (Sports Parks and Leisure)**

The Portfolio Holder for Sports, Parks and Leisure introduced the report setting out an update in relation to work in the Council across this area..

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Complaints around Vivary park paths and resurfacing issues had been made, an update was requested in relation to this.
- Outreach from the leisure contract beyond central towns was questioned.
- Developing outreach work was part of the contract and further work around this was ongoing.
- Adding an everyone active update at a future Scrutiny Committee was requested
- It was questioned if more could be done to support youth activities
- Costs for play park equipment remained high. It was recognised that more was needed to be done to supply leisure and play equipment for more remote areas.
- Adopting approaches for grass cutting using geofencing technology and digitally marking using satellite technology was used, to ensure areas that require cutting are scheduled alongside areas where due to the natural habitat the grass could be left to grow.
- The committee requested future emphasis on ensuring sports facilities using section 106 funding could be built for communities.
- Increased grounds maintenance and public seating provision across the West Somerset area was requested.
- Officers were thanked for the recent Councillor tour of the Crematorium.
- Improving and updating parks across the district was encouraged by Councillors.

The committee noted the update

19. **Verbal Update from PFH on the Introduction of Parking Electronic Permits & P&D - Cllr M Rigby**

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transportation provided the verbal update in relation to the Introduction of Electronic Parking Permits and recent developments in parking payment provision.

During the debate the following comments and questions were raised:-

- Concerns were expressed in relation to digital by default solutions being applied to parking without consultation with communities and stakeholders.
- The transition and introduction of new payment methodology was considered too soon for users of car parks in the old West Somerset area, due to technical issues, the poor mobile phone coverage and ageing population.
- No consultation with Councillors or members of the public was a key concern with the new car parking system. The committee were of the view that trials should have been made to new technologies before implementation.
- Councillors encouraged consultation with elected members and members of the public as part of the parking review.
- Systems enabling all members of the public to operate this was encouraged to ensure a smooth implementation.
- It was acknowledged that testing was required before new car parking technology was introduced in the future. The committee were thanked for their feedback and views on the future of car parking across the district.

The Committee noted the update.

(The Meeting ended at 9.03 pm)

