

SWT Executive - 18 June 2019

Present: Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts (Chair)

Councillors Chris Booth, Habib Farbahi, Ross Henley, Peter Pilkington, Mike Rigby, Francesca Smith and Alan Wedderkopp

Officers: Marcus Prouse, Paul Fitzgerald, James Hassett, James Barra, Tim Bacon, Paul Browning, Nick Bryant, Robert Downes, Laura Higgins, Nicki Maclean and Gerry Mills

Also Present: Councillors Roger Habgood, John Hunt, Libby Lisgo, Brenda Weston, Loretta Whetlor, Catherine Herbert, Marcus Kravis and Janet Lloyd

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors B Allen and R Lees

2. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Executive

(Minutes of the meeting of the Shadow Executive held on 26th March 2019 circulated with the agenda)

Resolved that the minutes of the Shadow Executive held on 26th March 2019 be noted.

3. 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 & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Herbert	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke
Cllr J Hunt	All Items	SCC	Personal	Spoke
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke
Cllr J Lloyd	All Items	Wellington	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 A Wedderkopp	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr B Weston	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke

Councillor Smith-Roberts declared a personal interest in Item 10 – Regeneration of Firepool, with a Charity she founded occupying a building on the site.

Councillor Smith declared a personal interest in Item 10 – Regeneration of Firepool in that a family member founded a Charity currently occupying a building on the site.

4. **Public Participation**

(a) Mr Alan Debenham asked the following questions;

Previous Questions put to full SWAT Council 22nd May with follow-up put in writing to the Scrutiny Committee meeting of 12th June re the undeveloped Firepool site in Taunton. “Can I assume, as do many local residents, that this newly elected Council will now revoke this whole ex-Tory hotel proposal forthwith and replace it with a much more positive and meaningful alternative? In line with the recently resolved declaration of “Climate Emergency” by the Shadow Council, could this be the construction of a visitors’ centre for “PEACE” (People’s Environmental Action for Climate Emergency) which would incorporate lively hands-on educational experiences, backed by a full library of publications and displays etc. like the WeTheCurious centre in Bristol harbourside - of course, plus a visitors ‘promotional’ vegetarian cafe-restaurant overlooking the river, a cycling centre, and a general repair and waste reduction-recycling large workshop?”

1. What is the latest state of the Council’s thinking and planning re the above, especially now that the proposal for a hotel appears not to have been deleted as I was led to believe, but merely its financing and operation changed from Council to private provision? And what has happened to my proposed and well thought out inclusion of a very innovative visitors’ PEACE centre as replacement for the hotel, or otherwise?

Previous Question put to full SWAT Council 22nd May which has yet to be properly answered, especially with reference to County Gazette’s recent follow-on reports of urgent staff recruitment being necessary to fill vacant Council posts wrongly made so by expensive overdone redundancies. The massacre of staff by the ex-Tory administration has left several departments struggling to efficiently fulfil their duties, especially in Planning and Building Control, and therefore, in the name of good management, I ask the new administration to conduct a thorough staffing review ASAP to redress these failings.

2. What is the latest position in the embarrassing filling of posts related to the overdone redundancies, and what is the total cost to the Council of this whole blunder, and who is taking responsibility for it? Also how is it, in the reported horrendous £5.6 million total redundancy pay-outs – especially for the ex-CEO and other top officers getting six figure amounts – that most of these posts still exist and as such, how on earth can they be treated as redundancies at all and how does this redundancies debauchery tie-in with the Council's suffering severe government imposed austerity for the past decade?
3. Now the government at last has released Councils from the previous borrowing cap on funding for new building of Council houses for rent, what does this now mean, both in monetary terms regarding the maximum new funds made available and in the numbers of Council rented houses completed, that the new administration now plans for the current year and those ahead? Also regarding the purchase of land for Council house building - a very worthy community cause at this time of rented housing crisis – will the Council be able to buy this at a very fair 'existing use value' under compulsory acquisition if this proves necessary as final resort AND, if not, why not?
- (4) In terms of CO2 concentrations and climate records, nothing higher than 280 ppm (parts per million) existed for the whole of human existence until the industrial revolution. The last time CO2 levels were at their current 415 ppm was 3 million years ago, and sea levels were 10 to 20 metres higher. This might very reasonably suggest a sea level rise of 10 to 20 metres is already locked into the global climatic systems. Given that the Government, as well as this new Council, have declared "Climate Emergencies", surely Planning Committee must now make climate change mitigation an immediate material consideration in all planning and building regulation matters? And with all existing planning and development permissions no longer fit for purpose, surely these MUST be reviewed ASAP for large uplifted sea level rises?

The Leader Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts thanked Mr Debenham for his questions, and allocated his questions various Portfolio Holders and Officers.

In relation to question 1, Councillor Farbahi responded that the concept was disliked in terms of taxpayer funding element, but that didn't mean that the Council could not explore opportunities. In terms of the environment, this was at the top of the Council's Agenda. We were going to work with partners to deliver an Innovation Centre and work with local stakeholders such as Universities on issues such as greenhouse gases and plastics. Firepool has to be financially viable and so all options had to be explored.

In relation to question 2, James Hasset responded that the confirmed figure in the accounts of £5.6 million as reported in the press with a £600,000 contingency which has largely realised for an overall figure of £6.2 million in line with what was reported. The reasoning for this figure was the inclusion of the Direct Labour Organisation in the restructuring programme. This added a large number of staff,

many of whom were in the 55+ bracket which made it more expensive, and more took up the Voluntary Redundancy (VR) scheme than had been expected. The option to go with a VR Scheme was made by the previous Council. The legislation made provision with the dissolution that the Chief Executive of the previous Councils was entitled to redundancy.

In relation to question 3, Councillor Francesca Smith responded that the Council was going to take up the opportunities afforded by the lifting of the borrowing cap to develop existing Council properties using our own land and if necessary purchasing land. 6000 properties in the old Taunton Deane Area were managed by the Council and the housing stock in West Somerset was controlled by Magna. Social Housing would be developed with a view to the whole area, depending on need. A clear steer had been given to the Officers to seeing more Social Housing being developed.

In relation to question 4, Councillor Mike Rigby responded that the thread of Climate Change was running through the manifesto. A review of the Local Plan had been instigated and this would encompass policy for the entire new district. Climate Change would be more centrally focused in the new Local Plan, and will take around two years to come into being. We had very ambitious plans for Carbon Neutrality that will feed into the planning policies being brought forward over the next two years.

5. **Allocation of Hinkley Point C s106 Tourist Information Centre Funds**

Councillor Farbahi introduced the circulated report, which concerned the suggested approach for allocating Hinkley Point C (HPC) Section 106 funds for Tourist Information Centres (TIC) for the next 3 years – 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22.

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and asked questions which included:-

- Questions were raised on the breakdown of the funding and the Service Level Agreement (SLA). The understanding had been that the original SLA required the Watchet TIC to be open 7 days a week. Had this been revised?
- What would happen after the funding ceased after three years?
- *The SLA's are reviewed annually. Watchet and Minehead TIC's are open for greater hours than the Porlock and there was no specificity to the number of days.*
- *After the three years there would be roughly £67,000 left in funding, and this would be the for Hinkley Tourism Action Partnership to decide how that was spent and would be reviewed nearer the time.*
- It was stated that TIC's would have funding streams available to them from other sources than this specific pot.

RESOLVED to agree the allocation of £72,000 of Hinkley Point C (HPC) Section 106 funding over three years to the three West Somerset based Tourist

Information Centres (TIC) in Minehead, Watchet and Porlock that are identified to receive allocations under the Development Consent Order (DCO) Agreement.

6. **Local Plan Issues Document - Approval for Public Consultation**

Councillor Mike Rigby introduced this item which sought approval for the first public consultation stage (the Issues Document) in the Local Plan making process.

RESOLVED that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Executive on 9th July to allow for the Scrutiny comments/amendments to be properly circulated and considered.

7. **District wide Local Plan: Local Development Scheme**

Councillor Mike Rigby introduced this item which concerned the Local Development Scheme (LDS) required to be prepared to set out the programme for the preparation of the District wide Local Plan and other development plan documents.

RESOLVED that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Executive on 9th July to allow for the Scrutiny comments/amendments to be properly circulated and considered

8. **District wide Local Plan: New Member Steering Group - Nominations**

Councillor Mike Rigby introduced this item which concerned the establishment of a Member Steering Group to support the Local Plan Review process.

RESOLVED that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Executive on 9th July to allow for the Scrutiny comments/amendments to be properly circulated and considered.

9. **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI): Draft for Consultation**

Councillor Mike Rigby introduced this item which concerned The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and set out how Somerset West and Taunton would involve our community and stakeholders in the preparation, alteration, and review of local planning policy and the consideration of planning applications within the Local Planning Authority area.

RESOLVED that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Executive on 9th July to allow for the Scrutiny comments/amendments to be properly circulated and considered.

10. **Regeneration of Firepool**

Councillor Habib Farbahi introduced the circulated report which was considered the next key step to progress delivery of the Firepool site. The report set out a programme of activity to deliver the outline planning consent. The report outlined a little of the history of the site, some lessons learned and the steps undertaken in the past three months to identify the likely most deliverable form of development in a relatively short programme. Appendix 1 consisted of the indicative conceptual block plan for the site which both built on the outline planning approval and accorded with current planning policy. This was not a prescriptive solution but it was a work in progress. The site was to be divided into bite size blocks to assist greater flexibility and certainty of delivery. The intention was that the Council would act as the masterplan developer to deliver the public realm and infrastructure to remove the obvious barriers to progress the site and act as a catalyst to delivery.

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and asked questions which included:-

- Questions were raised from the Executive around the Block plan scale details and the timing of delivering of the venue being pushed to the back-end and the separate delivery of a cinema?
- *The size was very indicative and the next process would be to fill in that detail but the scale would be adequate for the size of performance venue. The positive around using the Block 4 allocated for the Venue is that other activity is not dependent. The time would be allowed to prove the business case for a venue which was considered the most challenging without holding back the regeneration of the scheme. The Cinema could move ahead more quicker and there would be no conflict in terms of acoustics with the Venue.*
- There were concerns raised around the delivery programme risk and the Housing being easily developed and the rest not following on.
- Design was considered important and this was an opportunity to do something unique and environmentally friendly.
- It was accepted that the mixed use aspect ensured its deliverability but that the non-Housing aspects needed to be delivered.
- Other Members asked questions relating to the earliest deliverability date of the Firepool Site, that the Project Management was adequately resourced, the Brewhouse project considerations, an update on the Design Standards work.
- *In relation to the Brewhouse, all of the considerations were being taken in regard to the site and conversations would continue to maintain that theatre provision.*
- *In relation to Programme Management, to keep up pace and momentum some activities were being twin-tracked creating eighteen potential work streams and the right resources would be in place.*
- *Design standards will sit alongside the Framework Masterplan which will evolve, but developers will be given clear expectations of what is acceptable. The Portfolio Holder would take the point made and pursue this with the Planning team.*

- Further concerns were raised around Social Value being built into the process and the small businesses in and round the site on Station Road and Bridge Street being supported.
- *The Portfolio Holder reassured Councillors that the local businesses would be interacted with via a forum.*

RESOLVED that the Executive supported the following recommendations and recommended them to the Full Council to consider:

- (i) That the broad principle of the conceptual block plan design is progressed to Framework Masterplan and that indicative designs for all of the blocks are developed. In-particular Blocks 1, 2, and 5 be progressed to detailed business case and to provide authority to appoint a design team following due process.
- (ii) To endorse the approach that the Council further considers the business case to act as the lead commercial and masterplan developer and to delegate authority to the Head of Commercial Investment in consultation with the Portfolio Holder to enter into relevant transactions. This will include hard market testing of Blocks 1,2 and 5 to inform completion of business cases.
- (iii) To endorse the principle that the Council may also be the developer of some of the plots each being considered on a case by case basis and subject to a detailed business case and further Council approval.
- (iv) To note the review of the Hotel development project, to cease the current Council investment plans and cancel the existing budget approval and instead to seek a development partner/investor to deliver this scheme as an alternative to the previously approved Council development, and on a different part of the site. A specialist property adviser will be appointed to undertake a thorough hard marketing exercise.
- (v) To commission a suitable performance venue expert to establish the business case and conduct soft market testing with suitable operators for such a facility on site.
- (vi) To report back with progress as and when required and set up a project governance Board to oversee the direction of the project.
- (vii) Approval of a total budget of £275,000 to progress these work streams and this to be funded from New Homes Bonus funds.

11. **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

RESOLVED that the press and public be excluded during consideration of agenda item 12 on the grounds that, if the press and public were present during the item, there would be likely to be a disclosure to them of exempt information of the class specified in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended as follows:

The item contained information that could release confidential information that related to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information). It was therefore agreed that after consideration of all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

12. **Confidential Report - Commercial Asset Management**

The Executive considered this item which was commercially confidential and related to Asset Management.

RESOLVED that the Executive supported the following recommendations and recommended them to the Full Council to consider:

- (i) Purchase the property as a commercial investment on the basis of the costs and returns identified in Section 6.
- (ii) Delegate authority to the Head of Commercial Investment together with the S151 Officer to complete the transaction subject to satisfactory due diligence.
- (iii) Approve a Supplementary Budget within the Capital Programme in line with total investment costs summarised within Section 6, to be funded by capital borrowing.

13. **Executive Action Plan**

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

Resolved that the Executive Action Plan be noted.

14. **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.

(The Meeting ended at 8.45 pm)