

## **Swaffham Town Council**

Minutes of the virtual Extraordinary **Full Town Council** meeting held on **14<sup>th</sup> December 2020** at **6.30pm via virtual link:**

Present:	Mayor Cllr J Skinner (in the Chair)
Councillors:	Mrs J Anscombe, Mrs L Beech, Mr S Bell, Mrs W Bensley, Mr P Darby, Mr G Edwards, Mr B Holmes, Mr C Houghton, Mrs S Matthews, Mr I Pilcher, Mr L Scott
Breckland Cllrs	Mr E Colman, Mr P Hewett, Mr M Robinson, Mr I Sherwood, Mr D Wickerson
Breckland Officers	Mr R Burton, Ms Z Footer, Mr R Walker
Town Clerk Deputy Clerk:	Mr R Bishop Mrs C Smith
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The Mayor welcomed all to the meeting and outlined how the meeting would run.

1. **Apologies and reason for absence**  
None received.
2. **Declarations of Interest**  
There were no declarations of interest.
3. **Overview statement by the Mayor Cllr Jill Skinner.**

The Mayor read a statement giving an overview of actions so far regarding the Green Britain Centre (GBC) and the potential Asset Swap with Days Field.

6.34pm The meeting was adjourned to address questions from the public that had been submitted in advance of the meeting.

**Q. 1 How hard has Breckland been trying to dispose of the Centre? Is there a danger they see STC as a soft touch regarding the Centre's disposal?** – Breckland officer Mr Ralph Burton reported that after the GBC had been identified as an asset to be disposed of it went for sale. Soon after Swaffham Town Council approached Breckland to look at an asset swap. GBC was taken off the market at that point. There has been a considerable elapse of time since then and so the GBC was taken back to market to establish that no opportunities had been missed, whomever was the eventual owner of the building. Mr Burton confirmed that Swaffham TC were not a soft touch as they had diligently challenged Breckland over the last year.

**Q.2 Could the Town Council let the Town have the costs involved to repair/refurbish the Eco building and how many years it would take for the Town to see a substantial return on investment?** The Town Clerk reported the rectification costs detailed by the QS were much higher than the offer made by BDC. Both Councils were working towards mitigating the difference. When a final figure was reached this would be publicised.

**Q.3 Does Swaffham Town Council consider it prudent to risk taking on a building which is not fit for purpose and will require considerable expenditure and this incurring considerable expense for the residents of Swaffham with no assurance of recouping it?** The Town Clerk reported that the aim of the Town Council was to take on a building fit for purpose and trying to mitigate any risks to stop any costs falling on Swaffham.

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**Q.4 I believe there was a communication of some importance when it was released that the Town Council was to borrow up to £6 million to fund the purchase and this would be repaid very quickly by the rent from a few houses in the Town Council's ownership.** The Town Clerk reported that this question was at cross purposes, the estimated £6 Million pound project was a different project to build houses on Days Field, discussed and debated by the previous Council, this had not been progressed.

**Q.5 Is it right for a small market town to take on premises which have or should have regional if not national significance?** The Town Clerk reported that the building would be sold to someone and not stay in public ownership if the Town council do not take it on. There was no legal reason why the Town Council could not own the building if it was felt to be important to the Town.

**Q.6 If STC acquire the property where will the funding for rectification of future problems come from?** The Town Clerk reported that the main funding for future repairs would be from the lease holder on a full repairing lease.

**Q.7 How many years would it take to return a £750K profit to the town's accounts?** The Town Clerk reported that this whole exercise was to transfer a community asset that was currently not being used for an asset, that the Council believe can be used fully, for the benefit of the community. The aim was to be cost neutral.

**Q.8 My question is whether or not the deal really does represent good value for money for the townfolk of Swaffham or whether they will be paying for the Council's apparent extravagance for many years to come?** The Town Clerk reported that Councillors would be happy for the Town to judge when the financial details of the deal can be shared.

**Q.9 If it is decided to go ahead to the next stage what will this entail?** The Town Clerk reported that the next stage would be to finalise legal due diligence, develop the risk assessment and business plan, conduct public consultation and explore the sport and leisure options.

**Q.10 Has STC had the building property surveyed as opposed to resting on reports from Breckland?** The Town Clerk confirmed that the building had been independently surveyed.

**Q.11 Who is going to rent the Eco site for the next X years to repay a substantial investment in what is the worst economic state this country has faced, and retail/ commercial units are available everywhere at vastly reduced rents to get people into them?** The Town Clerk reported that there was a potential sport and leisure provider interested, others may come forward. Other than due diligence costs, there is no other investment currently planned.

**Q.12 If a tenant has to be found to operate the premises, why can't Breckland continue to be the landlords, rather than the Town Council?** BDC officer Ralph Burton confirmed that as described in Q1, BDC had agreed to dispose of the asset and would sell the GBC. They would not be leasing the building.

**Q.13 Is it intended to make part of the premises available for public use and if so, has any research been done into possible demand?** The Town Clerk reported that there were no details available yet as to what facilities may be in the building. It is dependent on who the anchor or sole tenant is and whether the defined route of sport and leisure is confirmed.

**Q.14 What will the benefit for the town be with a Swap for the Centre?** The Town Clerk reported that the benefits would be explained fully in the public consultation exercise. It was hoped that the site would help address the lack of sport and leisure facilities in the Town.

**Q.15 What land at present with the Centre comes with the deal and what restrictions will relate to its use?** The Town Clerk reported that there were 5 acres of land, including the building and carpark. There was a separate lease for the wind turbine, with a modest benefit to the freeholder. The only restrictions were access over part of the site to be retained.

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**Q.16 the design of the building is quite unusual, if not unique. Is there a danger the building could be listed and thereby increase charges such as repairs, insurance, etc?** The Town Clerk reported that the building was not currently Listed, and that Listed status may not be seen as a problem by the Council, as this could attract more opportunities for funding.

**Q.17 I do not know what the STC's current requirement for caretaker requirement is. With a larger building and more grounds will it mean STC will have additional costs in this area?** The preferred model would be to have a long-term lease holder who would manage the building and grounds. Only if that were not in place and the building was managed as a community building would manpower/caretaking issues need addressing.

**Q.18 Is this whole project really one to be developed at this time when STC expenses are bound to increase, public wages become lower and people have less money to pay rates, taxes, etc?** The Town Clerk reported that these issues would be part of the consideration by Town Councillors, there is no intention to go ahead blindly committing the Town to an expense they could not afford. The Financial Risk assessment deals specifically with this.

**Q.19 Is there a danger future generations of this town will have a 'mill stone' round their necks?** The Town Clerk reported that if the due diligence was completed successfully then, no, the project should not be judged by previous failures at the same site.

**Q.20 Finally, does STC still have an interest in the Convent site, please?** The Town Clerk confirmed that STC has an interest in the Convent site.

The meeting resumed 6.55pm

#### **ADMISSION TO MEETINGS ACT (PUBLIC BODIES) 1960:**

##### **CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS following the exclusion of the public and press**

4. **STC - Brief resume by Town Clerk – presenting executive summary and financial risk assessment.**

It was noted that these documents along with a further 85 documents had been circulated to Town Councillors as part of the due diligence process.

5. **Breckland Asset Swap Overview**

Cllr P Hewett outlined the asset swap idea and how it had arisen, he confirmed that any arrangement needed to be in the best interests of Swaffham and the wider Breckland community. He reported that it had been a long and challenging process and much hard work had been completed to get to this point. Whatever decision taken would be respected.

6. **Breckland Sport and Leisure Overview**

Cllr Robinson confirmed the commitment from BDC to improve on leisure facilities for Swaffham. Consultants were currently drawing up a report on the options.

Breckland Officer R Walker confirmed that BDC was free to choose a sport and leisure provider for Swaffham. The restrictions of a site where facilities are not available during the day were recognised as an issue. Once developed any services would need to get to a revenue neutral position. An initial report demonstrated that this was possible.

7. **Local Breckland Members**

Cllr Sherwood stated that he saw this as an opportunity for the Town to improve the Sport and Leisure offer. In his experience local people had expressed a wish for the site to be retained and in use.

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Cllr Wickerson concurred that he would like to see better sport and leisure facilities in Swaffham and that any project needed to stand up to financial scrutiny, but as he had not seen all of the paperwork that Town Councillors had access to, he had no further comment.

8. STC Q&A with Breckland Representatives – There followed a question and answer session, each Town Councillor was given the opportunity to ask questions.

7.38pm Breckland Cllrs and Officers left the meeting.

9. Asset Swap

Cllrs debated the issues around an asset swap.

10. Sport and Leisure

Cllrs debated the opportunity for sport and Leisure being sited at the GBC.

11. Consolidation for propositions

Cllrs debated the Barn centre and how this project fitted with aspirations for facilities in the Town. The technicalities of Capital and revenue funding and how these monies could be used were discussed.

Cllrs discussed the proposal to vote on continuing due diligence this would allow money to be spent on professional fees and services that would move this project forward. A cap of 25k was suggested. The Town Clerk reported that the £28k set aside for renewing planning permission for Days Field could be available and a budget for the work could be agreed at the Finance meeting later in the week.

Cllr Darby proposed that Swaffham Town Council agree in principle to the Asset Swap, to then proceed with the legal due diligence, additional feasibility study and public consultation, to negotiate with Breckland Council to become the sport and leisure provider for Swaffham and to make urgent enquiries with alternative Sport and Leisure providers. This was seconded by Cllr Houghton.

8.40pm The Public and Breckland Officers were readmitted to the meeting.

The Mayor welcomed the public back to the meeting and introduced the proposal by Cllr Darby, seconded by Cllr Houghton.

**Swaffham Town Council agreed in principle to the asset swap, to then proceed with the legal due diligence, additional feasibility study and public consultation, to negotiate with Breckland Council to become the sport and leisure provider for Swaffham and to make urgent enquiries with alternative sport and Leisure providers.**

**A recorded vote was taken:**

**In favour – Cllrs Skinner, Anscombe, Bensley, Darby, Holmes, Houghton, Matthews, Scott  
Against – Cllrs Beech, Bell, Edwards, Pilcher**

The meeting closed at 8.48pm.

Mayor.....

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