

Camden New Journal - by RICHARD OSLEY
Published: 14 December 2006

A sinister obsession in the Town Hall

Case reveals allegations of 'cosy consensus' over £2-billion development

THE Town Hall's former planning chief, sacked for alleged bias against the controversial £2 billion King's Cross development, was yesterday (Wednesday) vindicated by the local government watchdog.

The Adjudication Panel for England ruled that Councillor Brian Woodrow did not break any rules in publicly questioning the controversial plans to redevelop Europe's biggest brownfield site.

His two-year ordeal, described by friends as a "witch hunt" came to an end in the basement of the Bonnington Hotel in Holborn.

The protracted hearing, spread over three days, saw the lid lifted on acrimony at the heart of the Town Hall over the development. It heard an astonishing array of allegations about the planning regime.

Cllr Woodrow, in his defence, had accused former senior officers of pandering to big business over planning issues.

The hearing followed an investigation by the Standard's Board for England after Cllr Woodrow was reported by former borough solicitor Alison Lowton.

In a separate charge, the panel ruled he had breached a code of conduct when he spoke to conservation advisers English Heritage about his concerns for the site but that it was "at the low end in seriousness" and did not require punishment.

Cllr Woodrow, a Labour member who represents Holborn and Covent Garden, did not comment after learning that he will not face any sanction for the minor breach but looked relieved that the proceedings had finally come to an end.

Close friends, angry at his treatment, are nonetheless hailing the panel's verdict as a "good result".

Panel chairman Simon Bird said that Cllr Woodrow had a previously unblemished record of public service and had acted in what he thought had been the public interest.

In an explosive final session of the tribunal, Cllr Woodrow and his lawyer Robert McCracken gave an insight into the context of the case, attacking senior officers for being "downright obstructive" towards Cllr Woodrow and having a "sinister obsession" with what planning gain could be got out of the King's Cross project.

Mr McCracken said that relations between civil servants and elected councillors had broken down over King's Cross, naming Ms Lowton and environment director Peter Bishop.

Of Ms Lowton, he told tribunal: "She was clearly hostile to Councillor Woodrow. She was struggling with and determined to control Councillor Woodrow and his committee by means which might well have been seen as downright obstructiveness."

He painted a picture of chaos in the Town Hall's planning and legal departments in which Cllr Woodrow struggled to get access to simple documents such as briefing notes on King's Cross.

In one email exchange read to the tribunal, Ms Lowton questioned Cllr Woodrow's definition of a 'briefing note' when he had asked to see them.

Mr McCracken said Ms Lowton had been “astonishingly obstructive”, adding: “It was akin to President Clinton asking the Senate what consisted improper physical contact.” He said the papers should have been put in the Town Hall’s members’ room.

The basis of Cllr Woodrow’s legal team’s argument was that information and help was withheld by officials and, in that context, Cllr Woodrow made his own enquiries with English Heritage’s Patrick Pugh, a leading official in the conservation body. Phone calls – made some time in summer 2004 – were considered by the Standards Board to be some form of quiet lobbying by Cllr Woodrow in a bid to get English Heritage to oppose an outline application submitted by developers Argent Ltd. In his own words, Mr Pugh told the tribunal that the calls were “absolutely on the margin”.

Mr McCracken said officials were worried by anything that could derail the progress of the planning applications at the Town Hall.

Mr McCracken said a cabal of officers feared Camden would lose out on planning benefits if the scheme was transferred to an inspector or to the Secretary of State. He called it a “sinister obsession” among senior officers. Returning again to Cllr Woodrow’s exchanges with Ms Lowton, he told the tribunal: “She was a member of the management team which like the executive (a group of senior Labour councillors), was keen for Camden to grant permission for the King’s Cross development because more ‘planning gain’ would be won that way than on appeal to an inspector or the Secretary of State.”

Mr McCracken said that Cllr Woodrow had been “courageous” and had bravely questioned a “cosy consensus” between the developers and the Town Hall.

In his own evidence, Cllr Woodrow made a direct attack on Mr Bishop, who is on the verge of leaving Camden Council to take up a job advising London Mayor Ken Livingstone.

In an interview with Standards Board investigators – a transcript of which was given to the tribunal – Cllr Woodrow said: “There is a tendency to be quite sort of too over generous or helpful to what he calls the powerful institutions in the borough, which is very bad for us because we’re taking enforcement action against ordinary people and, again, the big guys seem to get preferential treatment.

“He’s interfered in various applications. So you know there is a cultural clash.”

With regard to Ms Lowton, he added: “My experience is that she’s not a person who understands planning, she simply relies on the planning officers, so if you want to get advice... there are difficulties of that sort.”

Cllr Woodrow added: “Let me put it this way, one of my colleagues said we in Camden, we need two... we should have two borough solicitors.

“One to represent members and one to represent the chief officers. I think that was a reflection on the general view that the borough solicitor will see herself as supporting the chief officers.”

Ms Lowton has since left the Town Hall. Her post was deleted in a raft of council cuts earlier this year and she took early retirement.

Cllr Woodrow, one of the most experienced councillors at the Town Hall, was Camden’s planning chairman for eight years before he was ousted by his own Labour colleagues last May. He no longer sits on the committee and overall control has transferred to the Lib Dem and Conservative partnership in charge at the Town Hall. New planning chairwoman Dawn Somper, a Tory, was among councillors from all parties who wrote to the tribunal in Cllr Woodrow’s support.

Argent Limited did not raise concerns about Cllr Woodrow’s conduct until chief

executive Roger Madelin saw comments attributed to Cllr Woodrow in the Architects Journal, a trade magazine, in September 2004. Cllr Woodrow claimed that those remarks had been 'sexed-up'. The panel cleared Cllr Woodrow of any wrong-doing in relation to his exchanges with journalists. While the tribunal was being prepared, Argent have since won approval for their blueprint from the council and Mr Livingstone. Only a High Court challenge will stop them from beginning work on the site.

Matthew Horton QC, representing the Standards Board, said that Cllr Woodrow's defence could amount to a "charter for disobedience".

He said: "Cllr Woodrow was seen as a champion for local people who were concerned about the scale of the King's Cross applications, and indeed against them. It is shocking that a Chair of the sub-committee should allow himself to be characterised in this way. It was an extraordinary course of conduct for the chair of the sub-committee."

A council press official said: "The Adjudication Panel made no criticism of the council or its officers in their handling of the King's Cross Development in their decision. The council is pleased that this matter has now been resolved through the appropriate channels."

Editorial – 14 December 2006

Slay the monster

THE government created a monster when it set up the Standards Board for England.

It was supposed to keep Town Halls clean and healthy.

Instead, it gave more powers to petty tyrants to keep councillors in check.

Putting his head above the parapet Councillor Brian Woodrow questioned the King's Cross scheme, and was almost blown away by officials, borough solicitor Alison Lowton and environment director Peter Bishop, who, effectively, put him up in the dock.

Since then Lowton has left the Town Hall, and Bishop is on his way to City Hall. In good time, too, because Woodrow has been vindicated.

Woodrow can take comfort from the fact that his case allowed one more hole for the Board to fall into.

Camden New Journal - LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Published: 21 December 2006

Well done to Brian for exposing planning murk

• I AM really glad Councillor Brian Woodrow fought as bravely as he did and exposed those who betrayed the public's interest (A sinister obsession in the Town Hall, Dec 14).

The anger over the way our planning department was run in the past few years is

now borough wide. The terrible consequences of the unwise planning decisions (backed eagerly by the Executive under Labour) will affect residents forever. Councillors Woodrow and Roy Shaw and former Councillor Gerry Harrison will be remembered as the honest voices among Labour leaders with respect to planning matters.

Those are the men who use their experience in evaluating planning applications whenever they were called to do so and were brave enough to speak up their mind when they disagreed.

Shaw and Harrison spoke up against the Dalby Street planning application, for example, but their sensible advice was not heeded by Town Hall officials.

VICKY BROWN

Mansfield Road, NW1

• I AM shocked to read about all the shenanigans that have been going on at the Town Hall over King's Cross, but I am not surprised (A sinister obsession in the Town Hall).

Elsewhere in the borough we hear about similar behaviour whereby private developers were given unreasonable concessions by Town Hall officials.

The Talacre affair, which recently made the headlines, is one nasty example. It is still unresolved.

A JAMES

North Gower Street, NW1

• THOUGH I have neither time nor sufficient knowledge to evaluate your long report on the case of Councillor Brian Woodrow versus Town Hall, I recognise important elements from my own experience.

The landlord of our block of flats in Frognal Estate is eager to build extra floors above our existing floors.

None of the residents want this addition which – it so happens – might dangerously weaken the structure of our existing blocks built over a railway tunnel. During the process of three repeated applications by our landlord, Camden's Planning department was not only unhelpful to us but they did their best to ignore our objections.

My protests about Camden's planning behaviour was partly ignored, partly defended by what could be regarded as insults to our communal intelligence.

Camden's planning officer recommended the application and it was granted on December 7.

Perhaps councillors on the planning committee did not argue the planning officer's recommendation as they did not wish to be harassed as evidently Cllr Woodrow was?

You report that "Cllr Woodrow, in his defence, had accused former senior officers of pandering to big business over planning issues".

In my experience, Camden's planning department puts business above the health and safety of ordinary residents.

AGNES KORY

Bela Bartok Centre for Musicianship

Finchley Road, NW3

• THANKS for Richard Osley's lucid and extensive report on the vindication of Councillor Brian Woodrow and for your succinct editorial (Slay the

monster, Dec 14).

You are, of course, absolutely right that the Standards Board for England, which had Cllr Woodrow on the rack for two years, has proved a grotesque monster and needs to be struck down.

It can have been no comfort to Cllr Woodrow (a Labour councillor for Holborn, whom I have never met) knowing that he was the victim of a creation of the Labour Party's blundering heffalump, John Prescott.

Considering its provenance it is not too surprising that the Board has proved a fatuous disaster, and an instrument of torture for conscientious local councillors of all political persuasions.

The Standards Board has proved a vehicle for seeking political advantage rather than for upholding high standards in public life. It subjects councillors to torturous quasi-legal proceedings without the safeguards of proper legal process.

There is no recourse to appeal, except to judicial review or the High Court.

Councillors cannot talk about complaints against them, but the press is free to do so with impunity.

There is no source of money to contest the case, and no recompense for costs or damage to your reputation when you are found innocent. I understand Cllr Woodrow, who was ousted by his own Labour colleagues as Camden's planning chairman, may be landed with a bill of £30,000 for the expenses he incurred defending his good name against accusations levelled against him by over-zealous council officers.

Yet of 10,000 complaints about councillors in three years, only seven per cent revealed any breach of the code of conduct. Barely three per cent are referred for any disciplinary action – and meanwhile approaching £12 million has been wasted. More insidiously, time and again the threat of Standards Board proceedings is used to silence councillors and to prevent them properly representing those who have elected them. Councillors should be subject to the same checks and balances as MPs, with final accountability at the ballot box, not before some dilatory sort of banana republic court martial.

I am glad to say that it is official Liberal Democrat policy that the Standards Board for England be abolished.

ROBIN YOUNG

Holborn Liberal Democrats

Bedford Court Mansions

Bedford Avenue, WC1

• YOUR article 'A sinister obsession in the Town Hall' makes for grim reading.

It justifies quite clearly the loss of trust ordinary people now have about planning officials at Town Hall.

These unelected members of Camden staff are paid for by the tax payers to protect the public's interest. What they get up to when allowed to "run the show" is quite outrageous. This must stop.

Cllr Brian Woodrow was entitled, in my view, to search for the truth about all the details concerning the King's Cross planning application. That was his job and he apparently tried to discharge his responsibilities the way we, the voting public, would expect him to.

It is a sad day when unelected members of staff seem to have more power than those we elected to represent us.

It also explains how the Dalby Street scandal came about in our own neighbourhood whereby residents now have to fight the council to save our local park from the unwelcome encroachment by a private developer.

All I hope now is that King's Cross has a successful appeal in Court and that the Dalby Street road closure will either be turned down outright or be the subject of an inquiry.

B KURT

**Grafton Terrace,
NW5**

Camden New Journal - LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Published: 28 December 2006

Woodrow was right to express concerns

• I AM writing on behalf of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee. The hearings of the Adjudication Panel for England into the alleged misconduct of Councillor Brian Woodrow were an education.

I now know the crucial difference between predetermination (closed mind) and predisposition (provisional view, however strongly held, capable of being changed by relevant argument or factor).

It has been held that having a predisposition does not violate a decision. It is open to doubt whether senior officers at Camden or English Heritage would pass this test. They seemed determined, come hell or high water, to get the King's Cross applications approved.

I consider Brian Woodrow's consistently expressed concern about this major application being dealt with in outline was fully justified.

Too often local authority officers push procedure and in so doing attempt to allay fears of local communities by suggesting the imposition of conditions.

These can prove worse than useless, can be subject to alteration or deletion. The decision of Camden Council to approve the outline application has meant that one of the largest developments in Europe has not been subject to the sort of detailed scrutiny which the government's own advice in PPG15 urges so far as developments affecting listed buildings and conservation areas are concerned.

The thanks that Cllr Woodrow gets for his all efforts to protect the public interest is to be subjected to this lengthy, arduous and expensive procedure.

Happily, Ms Lowton no longer works for the council. I have had personal dealings with her in the past and always found her to be unhelpful.

Peter Bishop is also on his way to work under Mayor Livingstone. No doubt smoothing the passage of this mega development did no harm to his job prospects.

I would urge your excellent paper to organise a fund-raiser for Brian to help him meet his legal costs. His barrister, Robert Mccracken, was a class act but that sort of assistance doesn't come cheap. We can only hope that the legal challenge currently being mounted to Camden's decision will succeed.

TONY TUGNUTT

Burton Street, WC1

Anger at 'churlish' Town Hall memo accusing cleared Brian

Ex-planning chief vindicated after two years, only for accusations to fly again

CAMDEN'S new legal chief and her press aides have come under fire for circulating a memo insisting that officials were right to report the Town Hall's former planning chairman to the Standards Board – even though he was vindicated last week.

Labour councillor Brian Woodrow was cleared of bringing the council into disrepute by the Adjudication Panel for England last Wednesday.

He was exonerated of wrong doing when he spoke to a journalist about his concerns for the planned revamp of the King's Cross railway lands.

The panel did find a breach concerning phone calls that Cllr Woodrow made to English Heritage about the £2 billion redevelopment – but considered the issue so "low level" that no punishment was required.

Labour colleague Councillor Julian Fulbrook said the one breach amounted to 'de minimis non curat lex' – a legal term which translates as 'The law doesn't deal with trifles', effectively too trivial to bother with.

Officers appear to hold a different opinion. Legal chief Melanie Field, the council's acting head of law since the exit of borough solicitor Alison Lowton last month, circulated a memo to all councillors on Thursday defending the council's actions and reminding them that Cllr Woodrow had been found guilty of one charge.

A similar statement was handed to journalists late on Wednesday evening by the press office. It said: "The council took the difficult, very carefully considered and appropriate action to report concerns about the conduct of the former Chair of the Development Control Committee in relation to his role in the decision making process for the King's Cross Development to the Standards Board."

The panel heard at a tribunal hearing that relations had broken down between officers and councillors.

The statement circulated by Ms Field and the press office said: "The council strongly refutes the allegations made during the hearing by Cllr Woodrow about council staff.

The council has concerns about the fact that the hearing process does not allow any right of reply to these accusations."

The statement triggered an almost immediate response by angry councillors. One email – seen by the New Journal – sent by Cllr Fulbrook to Ms Field said: "Having regard to the agony that Councillor Woodrow has been put through, and the actual resulting decision that, presumably on the basis of de minimis non curat lex, there was no need to take any further action of any kind on this residual breach when all the very serious charges had been thrown out, I would regard the council's response as churlish in the extreme."

Cllr Woodrow was picked up for phoning English Heritage's Patrick Pugh, a former Camden employee.

Cllr Fulbrook told Ms Field: "If councillors are not able to have a private conversation with ex-council staff, without all of this resulting nonsense, there will be a danger that we may have to have an embargo on speaking to existing council staff too."

Other councillors from all political parties are believed to have made similar objections. Cllr Woodrow spent last week recovering from a two-year investigation into his actions and a three day panel hearing at which he spent eight hours answering questions.

Speaking for the first time since the verdict, he said: "I welcome the Tribunal's decision that I had not brought the council into disrepute in any way. Only in one instance did they find that I had marginally breached the Code, "at the low end" and whilst defending the public interest.

"I am pleased that after so long and so much stress, I have been so fully vindicated. My grateful thanks to the many friends, colleagues and constituents who have supported me throughout this long ordeal and at the hearings."

Camden New Journal - by RICHARD OSLEY

Published: 22 February 2007

Town Hall chief's 'no regrets' over KX probe

Top civil servant says reporting vindicated councillor was right

MOIRA Gibb, Camden Council's chief executive, is adamant that the Town Hall was completely justified in pursuing Labour councillor Brian Woodrow through a draining Standards Board investigation – even though he was ultimately vindicated.

She was said this week to have been "personally involved every step of the way" and has no regrets over the action. The case laid bare the tension over the planning process at the Town Hall and bitter relations between councillors and the officers paid to serve them.

The claims emerged at a meeting of the council's internal Standards Committee at the end of last month.

Cllr Woodrow was accused of bias against the redevelopment of the King's Cross railwaylands in his role as planning chairman, a position he was later ousted from by his own Labour colleagues amid concern that he could derail the £2 billion proposals.

An adjudication panel brought a two-year Standards Board investigation to end in December when it ruled that Cllr Woodrow's actions did not warrant a punishment. Lib Dem councillor Paul Braithwaite has now revealed that he had a meeting with Ms Gibb on December 19 at her request in which she told him that she was unhappy that he had described the process as a "witch hunt".

In a letter to Camden's committee, he said: "She told me that the council had been right to pursue Brian Woodrow, that there had been no 'witch hunt' and she had been personally involved at every step of the way."

Ms Gibb has not commented on the case.

During his hearing, Cllr Woodrow accused unelected council officers of being obsessed with getting the applications through the planning process without the need for an inquiry.

In a follow-up letter to Ms Gibb, Cllr Braithwaite added: "I found our conversation helpful. It demonstrated to me how far apart our views are on the Brian Woodrow

'affair', with the benefit of hindsight.

"You appeared to be implacably confident that you and your team did 'the right thing'. I had hoped that it would be a 'line in the sand', lessons could be learned, the council could display some generosity of spirit and we could move forward to a more cohesive and less threatening working relationship between councillors and your council.

"I urge you to consider bridge building rather than hauling up the drawbridge."

Cllr Braithwaite – elected to the council last May – said lessons from the case had still not been learned.

A council statement said: "The council took the difficult, very carefully considered and appropriate action to report concerns about the conduct of the former Chair of the Development Control Committee in relation to his role in the decision making process for the King's Cross Development to the Standards Board – the national watchdog for standards in local authorities."

Camden News - by RICHARD OSLEY

Published: 7 May 2009

Slap in the face for bruised Brian

Faithful servant told he will not be allowed to stand again as Labour choose election team

HIS face was, by all accounts, bruised. But this was not physical abuse. The pain went deeper than a mere biff in the eye.

Told he was no longer wanted as a Labour candidate in his home neighbourhood of Holborn and Covent Garden, Councillor Brian Woodrow was said to have "held it together" in front of fellow party members when he learned of his surprise de-selection at a group meeting last Wednesday night.

A couple of recounts could not change the result: just a couple of votes saw him de-selected.

Behind the brave face, friends said Cllr Woodrow, 73, was actually left hurt at losing the chance to serve for another four years and extend a spell at the Town Hall which has run unbroken since 1990. "The day before the selection meeting he had an accident at home, a little bump and his face was bruised on one side," said one Labour member who was at the meeting.

"It might have made some of the members think that he was older and not as capable as he once was and they wanted a young man instead. That's how fickle it can be.

"What they should have been thinking about was what Brian has offered over all these years. He has recovered from health problems and deserved another roll."

Cllr Woodrow has certainly rolled with the punches in recent years. When in charge of the council's planning committee, he was accused of showing bias against the £2billion King's Cross redevelopment before a decision to give it approval had been made.

He was reported to the Standards Board, but after two years of investigations, he was vindicated. He had to use his own money to defend himself.

In the meantime, his Labour colleagues had pushed him out of the chairman's seat and wanted him to stay away from the final discussions.

Those close to him said he had been the victim of a "witchhunt" and his lawyer

Robert McCracken said the council had a “sinister obsession” with what planning gain could be gleaned from the planning deal for the railway lands.

The episode is said to have created bad blood, almost splitting the Labour group in half. It made Cllr Woodrow all the more determined to carry on at the council.

Labour’s selection meetings – currently being held ward by ward, almost nightly – are held up internally as being the most democratic way to assemble a team to fight the boroughwide elections next May.

Other parties look to their leaders to field their final line-up.

Labour proudly points out that its system has given potential candidates from minority ethnic groups the chance to shine and the diversity across their team reflects Camden’s multicultural make-up like none of their rivals.

But the selection meetings are also known by insiders as a “snake pit”, a night of long knives, where experience and acumen can count for nothing in a final secret ballot. Overnight, nearly 20 years of council know-how can be dropped in a flash and last week it was Cllr Woodrow’s turn to be dumped.

“Maybe it was a stitch-up, maybe there was nothing – but it leaves a bad taste in the mouth,” said one serving Labour councillor. “He has worked so hard for Camden and then the party drops him just like that. I think he deserved better. I feel for him.”

After a career in an architectural practice, Cllr Woodrow served for many years as the council’s planning chairman. He is no longer in control of the committee – his party are no longer in control of the council.

But as a backbench member of the committee, he is skilled at cutting through the frequently clumsy debates about footling applications for dormer windows and such that otherwise threaten to run long into the night.

It is undisputed at the Town Hall that few councillors have a better insight into how the council works and members of other political parties are sad to see him go.

Yet, Cllr Woodrow’s council career was effectively ended by his colleagues. His ward colleagues Julian Fulbrook and Sue Vincent were re-selected – Cllr Vincent did not need to face a vote as she was the only female nominee and party rules state each ward’s ticket should be mixed-gender.

The new face is Awale Olad, who fought and lost a by-election contest in Kentish Town last year. He lives in the ward and has shown enthusiasm in the face of Labour’s difficulties in Camden. What’s more, he could become the borough’s first Somali councillor. There is no ill will inside the party or beyond towards him for his victory, but there remains a sense of regret about Cllr Woodrow.

He declined to comment, but a close friend compared his defeat to the selection meetings before the 2006 elections in which another long-serving councillor, Roger Robinson, was almost deselected. He lost an initial vote but an investigation into the ballot revealed some of those members who took part were ineligible. He then won a second vote.

The party have defiantly defended the process. Supporters Robert Latham and Mike Katz both have letters in the New Journal this week (see page 14) insisting that a team is being elected that is capable of wresting back control of the council in 2010. Labour is losing experienced councillors Theo Blackwell, Penny Abraham and its leader Anna Stewart, but it is confident new faces like Mr Olad and a few former councillors will go down well with voters. “It’s a mix of old and new,” said a member close to the action.

Cllr Woodrow, however, will not line up on the ballot paper for the first time in almost two decades.

May 2010 –John Gulliver

Parting shot from quiet revolutionary

I NEVER found him a thrusting politician with sharp elbows. He never yearned for the headlines and a top job. But Brian Woodrow was his own man. If he fell into the hands of a double dealer – and the political world abounds with them – he would freeze them out of his life with a sharp rejoinder or a nasty put-down.

Brian reserved his energies for the things he believed in – and as a man who started out in politics as a dedicated conservationist the borough benefited. Two men riled him while he led the council's planning committee – one a councillor who had a reputation as a nasty bruiser, the other a duplicitous civil servant. He told them both to get lost. Brian can be summed up as a quiet rebel.

He found his passion for politics campaigning in the 1970s with Frank Dobson – who has just retained his seat as the Holborn MP – to save lovely Georgian buildings in Bloomsbury, mainly the terraced rows in Calthorpe Street and Rugby Street, all of them threatened with demolition by developers. Few families in those streets probably know that the houses they live in wouldn't be standing if it wasn't for Brian and his fellow campaigners. Brian isn't the type to boast of his war against the commercial philistines.

Later, Brian, who worked in a design team for a well-known firm of architects, was elected as a Labour councillor in 1990. An opponent of what he calls the "dodgy world" of developers, he once ran foul of one who wrote a letter to the Town Hall complaining that Brian had shown bias against his proposal. This had never happened. But down came the fury of senior Labour councillors, backed up by one or two civil servants, and Brian found himself suspended from his position as a chairman and having to face an inquiry by the government watchdog, the English Standards Board. He was cleared, of course.

All of this is still fresh in his mind and probably filtered through it at a recent farewell party at the Town Hall. Friends among politicians and several council officials crowded into a committee room. Wearing his Martin Bell-style white suit, Brian cracked jokes – and made, inevitably, some serious points, calling for the council not to rely on people seeing planning documents online and warning that councillors of all political stripes often found out more about the council from the New Journal.

As a democrat, he condemned the cabinet system of local governance, in which an inner cabal of senior councillors boss the play at the Town Hall.

Then he joked: "I'm being released back into the community. People have asked whether I'm ready for that – others have asked whether the community is actually ready for my release."

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