

**Minutes of the extraordinary FULL COUNCIL MEETING held on  
Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2026 at 7.30pm in the Community Hall.**

**Councillors present: Cllrs K.Anderton, S.Anderton, Bateman, Coulter, Crawford, Fradley, Hood, Jones, and Wright.**

**In the Chair: Cllr Hood (Vice Chair).**

**Officers present: Deputy Clerk.**

**Somerset Councillors: Cllr Trinnell (arrived approx. 7.45pm).**

**Members of the public: 21, including the applicants and their  
planning agent (see item 25/170, below)**

**Public session opened: 7.30pm.**

Before inviting contributions from members of the public who might wish to address the Committee, the Chair explained that the extraordinary meeting had been called because the Local Planning Authority (LPA) had consulted the Council about Planning application 20/01229/FUL (see Item 25/170 below). The application had first been put out for consultation in 2020, and the Town Council had recommended approval by a substantial majority, but subsequently the LPA received revised information from the applicant. In view of the significant lapse of time and the degree of public interest, the LPA had taken the view that a fresh consultation was in order. The Council's Planning Committee had referred the application to the Full Council, and it was the only business item on the agenda of the extraordinary meeting. The Council's previous decision to recommend approval should not be simply set aside, but neither was it binding on the current Council.

Among the points made by members of the public opposing the application were the following:

- The so-called Treehouse is not a treehouse in the normal sense of the word, but a residential building on stilts, set amongst trees.
- The site is outside the town's development area, in deciduous woodland, where planning law does not permit residential development.
- This woodland is a quiet and peaceful haven for wildlife, traversed by an old medieval route and with no man-made structures; the proposed development would spoil it.
- Although the proposed development is intended for guest accommodation, once built it could be used as permanent residential accommodation, maybe with parking provision applied for retrospectively. Were this to happen it would fundamentally alter the character of the woodland.

- Wildlife would be greatly disturbed if the development goes ahead, initially (during the construction process) by heavy machinery, concreting and noise, and subsequently (when the treehouse is occupied), by electric lighting and the voices of guests. This would compromise the existing ecosystem.
- The proposed development is supposed to use revenue from paying guests to fund woodland management, but in Planning terms it is not appropriate to erect a residential dwelling within woodland as a means of generating income.
- Although the proposed development is exceptional in design, if it is permitted it is likely to encourage further applications for residential development within woodlands, changing their character forever.
- Objections to the proposed development have been expressed by conservation bodies including the Somerset Wildlife Trust, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), the Woodland Trust, and Bruton Conservation Trust (BCT), and by many Bruton residents.
- Access to nature in the UK is becoming increasingly limited, and this piece of woodland is an invaluable and easily accessible natural resource for Bruton residents, so it is incumbent on the Council to do what it can to protect and preserve it.

Among the points made by members of the public supporting the application were the following:

- Bruton residents broadly agree on the importance of protecting the natural environment, but woodland does not look after itself, so what is at stake is how to exercise stewardship in a sustainable way. The applicants are a local family who are clearly committed to securing the woodland's future, and they have devised an imaginative and ambitious plan to achieve this.
- The health of the woodland has been severely compromised by ash dieback, and the key to its recovery is well-funded and responsible woodland management, as set out in the application.
- For residents who have long known and loved the woodland, the damage wrought by ash dieback has been a great sadness. A neighbour who owns adjacent woodland expressed strong support for the applicants' approach, contrasting it favourably with the (perfectly legal) clear felling of diseased and vulnerable trees practised by many other woodland owners.
- Thanks to the sympathetic design of the proposed treehouse, and its location near the edge rather than in the middle of the woodland, it is likely to have far less impact on the environment than people walking through the woods with their dogs, especially when (as in the past) their numbers were swelled by the attractions of a café further up the valley.

Among comments made by the applicants and their planning agent were the following:

- The project has been on hold since 2020, mainly because of the phosphate discharge issue, but the enforced delay enabled the applicants and their consultants to liaise closely with Somerset Council's tree and ecology officers and the LPA over a prolonged period, refining a wide range of mitigation and improvement measures.
- The design of the treehouse and its surroundings are exceptional, the work of award-winning architects and specialist landscape designers. The structure is highly sustainable, with minimal ground contact and soil disturbance, there is no bulky superstructure, and the proposed planting mix will increase woodland resilience and enhance local biodiversity.
- In tackling the very real problem of ash dieback the applicants never supported the widespread and commercially more attractive strategy of clear felling. Instead, from the start they adopted a less drastic and more nuanced approach to managing the challenge, an approach which is now widely considered environmentally preferable.
- The site is well outside Bruton Conservation Area and, contrary to what some have suggested, the woodland is not ancient woodland.
- The treehouse is strictly for guest accommodation, it would have no permitted development rights, and it could never become a permanent residential dwelling without the agreement of the LPA.

**Public session closed: 8.05pm.**

**Meeting started at: 8.05pm.**

**25/168: Apologies for Absence (LGA 1972 s85(1)).**

Cllr Dunn had sent apologies for being unavoidably absent.

**25/169: Declarations of Interest.**

Members to declare any interests, including disclosable pecuniary interests (DPI) they may have in agenda items that accord with the requirements of the Town Council's Code of Conduct and to consider any written requests from members for dispensations that accord with the Localism Act 2011 s33 (b-e) (This does not preclude any later declaration).

No interests were declared.

**25/170: To consider a Planning application referred to the Full Council by the Planning Committee.**

20/01229/FUL: Land North of Coombe Rise, Higher Tolbury, Bruton, BA10 0DJ  
Construction of a Treehouse for use as guest accommodation.

Councillors asked the applicants several questions, including those that follow; the answers are shown in italics:

- In what respects does the revised application differ from the original application submitted in 2020? *The landscape and woodland management plan has been updated, and so have the arboricultural and ecological documents as their validity expired after three years, but the application has not been changed to any significant degree.*
- How would the proposed development benefit Bruton? *We live surrounded by nature, and the treehouse would enable us to share this privilege with others who are not so lucky. It would offer visitors a unique but accessible holiday experience, enabling them to immerse themselves in nature without needing a car to get there (since the site is within walking distance of the railway station). This would enhance Bruton's appeal to visitors who support local businesses.*
- How would the proposed development be of direct benefit to local people? *The treehouse would generate income, enabling us to manage the woodland sustainably in the long term. Clear felling would be easier and more profitable for us in the short term, but it would be to the detriment of local people who enjoy walking in the woods. Also, glimpses of the treehouse might become an attraction for some, while those who are less enchanted can easily avert their eyes.*

**At 8.15pm Councillors finished questioning the applicants and went on to discuss the application. Among the points they made were the following:**

- The fact that so many Bruton residents have taken such pains to comment on this application, in some cases travelling a long distance to do so, shows how much they care about the town and surrounding countryside.
- Over the last five years, many Bruton residents have attended one or more of the five Committee and Council meetings (including the present one) where this application has been discussed, but there has never been anything approaching a consensus. Likewise, there are well over 200 public comments on the LPA portal, and they are almost equally divided for and against the proposed development. Some residents claim that it would destroy the woodland while others say that it would save it, so there is no single decision or course of action that would satisfy the whole community.
- The design of the treehouse is brilliant, but its location is problematical. Over the last forty years there has been creeping urban encroachment northwards from Tolbury into the countryside, and the proposed development would extend this c.100 metres further, into woodland. This would compromise the boundary between town and country, and it would

also weaken the case against eventual urban infill should there happen to be a change of ownership sometime in the future.

- The Woodland Management Plan is a crucial part of the whole project, but it is not the subject of this planning application which is simply for the treehouse. Conversely, the Management Plan could be delivered without the treehouse.
- The proposed treehouse is a highly sophisticated and presumably costly development, and renting it out as a holiday let could only generate a return on investment in the long term, so it seems a surprising way to fund a woodland management plan which requires substantial funding up front.
- National Planning guidance permits isolated developments in rural areas if they are of outstanding architectural merit and if they significantly enhance their immediate setting; it is possible that the proposed development may satisfy these criteria.
- Nature conservation is generally better served when people are drawn in, not excluded, and the treehouse project is animated by this principle of engagement.
- Holiday visitors do support local businesses and generate employment for local people, but even so the Council generally prefers to see rental property being used to house local families. However this would not apply to the treehouse because it would not and could not be a normal residential property.
- Technical arboricultural and ecological judgements are best made by individuals and organisations with the relevant expertise, rather than by lay councillors.
- Many decades ago, but within the living memory of some councillors and other residents, the site of the woodland was simply open scrubland, and it became wooded through benign neglect, so calling it 'ancient' woodland is a bit of a stretch.
- Whatever its origins, the woodland is now a much-loved local amenity, but woodlands need to be managed if they are to stay healthy. The proposed treehouse is an integral part of an ambitious management plan which aims to enhance the woodland's biodiversity and resilience, and if the plan is turned down the future of the woodland would be in doubt.

**It was RESOLVED 7-1-1 [For-against-abstain]:**

- a) to acknowledge that although the woodland north of Coombe Rise is greatly valued by many local residents, there are deep divisions between those who believe that the proposed development would damage irretrievably the nature, integrity and biodiversity of the woodland, and those who believe it would secure its long-term viability.**

- b) that since there is no community consensus, the Council would abide by its previous resolution 20/21 of 16th June 2020 in which it recommended APPROVAL of the application.

It was RESOLVED 9-0-0 to recommend that if the LPA decides to permit the application, a condition should be imposed allowing the proposed development to be used only as short-term accommodation for guests of the occupants of Coombe Rise, and not as an independent, stand-alone residence.

It was RESOLVED 6-0-3 to recommend that if the LPA decides to permit the application, a condition should be imposed specifying that the proposed development does not benefit from Permitted Development rights since it is outside the curtilage of the main residence.

It was RESOLVED 7-0-2 to recommend that if the LPA decides to permit the application, a condition should be imposed requiring that the proposed development cannot be sold or legally separated from the main residence without the consent of the LPA.

It was RESOLVED 9-0-0 to recommend that if the LPA decides to permit the application, a condition should be imposed requiring that the agreed Woodland Management Plan be maintained throughout the life of the proposed development.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm.

**END OF MINUTES**