

# Taunton Deane Borough Council

**Executive - 19 January 2011**

## **Improvements to the High Street, Taunton**

**Report of the Strategic Director, Joy Wislade**

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Norman Cavill)

### **1. Executive Summary**

<p>This report requests Executive approval for work to draw up plans for the improvement of Taunton's High Street</p>
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### **2. Background**

The High Street is a central retail area of Taunton Town Centre. Whilst a small amount of investment in its improvement was made in 2010, the area has largely been un-invested in whilst plans for a comprehensive retail development covering both sides of the High Street were developed in line with the Vision for Taunton plans now Project Taunton.

However, due to the current economic circumstances this comprehensive scheme is likely to take longer to implement than initially thought and is also only likely to take in the eastern side of the High Street. Improvements to other areas of the town centre (Somerset Square, Castle Green) are or have taken place and it is critical that the High Street is not left as the poor relation.

With this in mind this paper proposes the work to design a scheme of works to improve the appearance and functionality of the High Street as a key retail area. A full scheme is unlikely to be affordable immediately and the proposal is to design an overall master plan that can be achieved in phases as funding is available, rather than investing in random improvements from time to time.

### **3. Details**

A concept paper has been prepared by Swan Paul Partnership which is attached at Appendix A. It is proposed that a master plan for the High Street that can be delivered in phases is developed. The brief for this piece of work will be based on the Conceptual Approach described in paragraph 7 of Appendix A.

The master plan needs to be developed as a phased approach as a full scheme is not likely to be affordable immediately. The timing for the project is critical. To make as much impact as possible it would be desirable to complete some works in time for the summer period though should a planning application be required this might take a little longer. There is evidence that some of the current trees pose a health and safety risk. A survey of the trees has been carried out by TDBC and SCC officers and a full report will be available at the end of January. Any trees that do need to come down need to be felled before the end of March before birds start their nesting, or left until the end of the year.

#### **4. Finance Comments**

Some funding may be available from the unallocated Growth Points capital funding. Once we know what the different phases of the scheme might cost a further report will be made to members. Other sources of funding will also be investigated.

#### **5. Legal Comments**

We will need the agreement of SCC to undertake the works as the High Street is part of the Highway network. Otherwise there are no particular legal issues.

#### **6. Links to Corporate Aims**

This scheme links to the Regeneration corporate aim.

#### **7. Environmental and Community Safety Implications**

The design of the scheme will take into account community safety implications.

#### **8. Equalities Impact**

The design of the scheme will incorporate issues around access for all, DDA etc.

#### **9. Risk Management**

The design will be subject to a risk management approach.

#### **10. Partnership Implications**

This scheme can only be delivered in partnership with others. A small project group consisting of officers from Somerset County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and the Town Centre Company has been set up. The private sector who have interests in the High Street will also be engaged in the process.

## 11. Recommendations

- a) That the Executive approve the plan to draw up a master plan for improvements to the High Street.
- b) That the final plans and implementation strategy are discussed at Scrutiny prior to full approval by the Executive.
- c) That trees identified as at risk are taken down prior to the end of March but are replaced with smaller trees, perhaps in pots, in line with the overall new scheme.

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# Taunton High Street

Brief overview of existing status  
and concept ideas for enhancement

September 2010

Prepared for Project Taunton by



## Appendix A

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Swan Paul Partnership Ltd., Chartered Landscape Architects have been asked by Project Taunton to provide a brief overview of Taunton High Street in its current state and put forward some broad concept ideas for discussion. Swan Paul have been based in Taunton since 1986, just a few years after the current pedestrianisation scheme was implemented and so have seen it mature and viewed the way it is used.

### 2 LAYOUT AND EMPHASIS

Overall the High Street functions well, allowing good access to shops on both sides and good cross connections between Orchard Shopping Centre, Crown Walk and Bath Place. Inevitably, the concentration of shops and therefore footfall, is at the north end, closer to the Town Centre. To the south the functions are biased more to service industries, a restaurant and hair salon for example, with reduced numbers of pedestrians.

### 3 CHARMING BUT TIRED

The attached drawing SPP.1603.2A, shows the existing layout together with some broad concept ideas in comparison. The majority of the High Street is surfaced in brown concrete block paving with smaller areas of precast concrete slabs. From talking to shoppers and listening to the views of the Town Centre manger, it is considered that many people think the High Street has a certain charm, but at some 30 years old it is fair to say the scheme is looking very tired and somewhat dated.

### 4 RELATIONSHIP WITH FORE STREET.

Approximately 15 years ago a major refurbishment was undertaken of Fore Street and the area behind the Market Hall. This has proved a successful mix of traditional surfacing with contemporary furniture. In our opinion, the High Street in comparison has become the 'poor relation', which is unfortunate given the strong physical relationship. However, it is right that the High Street should retain its own identity.

### 5 QUICK OBSERVATIONS

- Host to successful markets
- Limited music, buskers
- Developing pavement cafe culture
- Quite dark, overshadowed, can be cold for shoppers
- Red Route for emergencies is tortuous
- Over mature trees are rootbound in planters and possibly unstable
- Sitting spaces and bike stands are well used
- Certain cross routes are restricted
- Lack of sense of 'entrance'
- Limited awareness of Vivary Park beyond
- Some paving is uneven and beyond its service life
- Uncoordinated street furniture – seats, bike stands, signs, electrical boxes
- Outdated lighting. Christmas lights strung in tree canopies
- Good access for service vehicles, trees and furniture provide some traffic calming

## Appendix A

### THE GOOD



Busy, active, vibrant, attractive architecture



Pavement cafe culture, colour, dappled shade



Potential strong axis and visibility to Vivary Park

## Appendix A

### THE BAD



Strangled rootbound trees breaking their planter & possibly unstable



Uncoordinated paving and materials



Uneven paving, possible hazard

## Appendix A

And THE UGLY



Dark brick planters, broken seats, litter and leaf catch



Isolated electrical boxes, loose, vulnerable & potentially dangerous



Old galvanised bike stands, misleading & unwelcoming signage



## Appendix A

### 6 WHERE NOW?

There appears to be a consensus the High Street is tired and outdated, but that it has a desirable charm and credible assets. Therefore wholesale change may be unwelcome, but a more subtle approach may bring the desired enhancements whilst maintaining the valued features, to foster greater use and activity.

It is considered that the lead for change could be generated by the need to address some of the technical issues, including:-

- Over mature, rootbound trees which may be unstable in the short term
- Electrical services for the market and other intermittent activities
- Lighting – daily and Christmas
- Uneven and possibly hazardous paving
- Addressing requirements of emergency 'Red Route'

In addition there is an overlay of desirable objectives, including:-

- Sense of 'entrance' at north end, Fore Street
- Axis and focus at south end, Vivary Park
- Higher identity and recognition of Bath Place
- Coordinated street furniture and improved surfacing
- Colour, light, focus, feature and welcome

### 7 CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

We believe there is an urgent need to undertake a qualified assessment of the existing trees. If our view is shared that removal of many is required, a more open palette is created for the proposed changes.

It is considered that one approach is to develop a strong boulevard, with a central axis, replacing the trees lost with a greater number. The species chosen would be of a more fastigiated form for less overshadowing, better shop sign visibility and easier emergency access. The trees in grilles would be some 4 to 5 metres from the facades and establish the line for new street furniture including bike stands, signs, lighting columns, seats, cash machine, telephone boxes. Lighting columns could support Christmas lights strung across the street. The central boulevard could be resurfaced to give a strong north-south emphasis. A rationalisation of the existing features will give greater space for markets with less constricted pedestrian access when in operation. In our opinion there is a strong case for an artist designed arch or feature at the north end to provide a sense of entry and emphasis for Bath Place.

### 8 AFFORDABILITY

It can be appreciated that a complete scheme of replacement will be expensive. At over 4600 square metres, an approximate estimate based on public realm civil works could be realistically between £600,000 and £700,000. As this may not be achievable, it is more realistic to consider partial replacement and possibly a phased approach. However, it is strongly recommended that if this approach is taken, any element(s) implemented must be part of a comprehensive masterplan. It is believed that some of the urgent and necessary works, which would achieve some improvements could be addressed by a budget in the order of £100,000.