

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive – 14 October 2009

Task and Finish Review into Employment Land in Taunton

Report of the Scrutiny Officer

(This matter is the responsibility of Councillor Simon Coles)

Executive Summary

This Task and Finish review has now been concluded. The final report has been submitted to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and was approved subject to some amendments (detailed below) being recommended.

This cover sheet provides directions on how the Executive should deal with the Task and Finish report into employment land in Taunton, particularly its five recommendations.

The final report of the Task and Finish review follows this cover report.

1. Recommended Changes to the Task and Finish Report suggested by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

- 1.1 The final report of the Task and Finish Group was considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 6 August 2009. During the discussion of this item, a number of suggested changes to the recommendations were made. These are shown in **bold print** on the attachment marked "Extract from the Minutes of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee meeting".
- 1.2 The report was also initially considered by the Executive at its meeting on 16 September 2009. The wording of Recommendation (3) was queried on the basis that the preferred location of the proposed strategic employment site was not referred to – even though such information was contained in the main body of the report.
- 1.3 As a result, the item was deferred to allow the Task and Finish Group to reconsider the wording of Recommendation (3). An amended form of words has now been put forward and this is shown in the bold, larger font in the attachment.

2. The Executive is asked to do the following:-

- 2.1 Consider the above recommended changes of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and agree whether or not these should be included in the report.
- 2.2 Then consider the report and its recommendations and decide which, if any, of the recommendations it wishes to adopt.
- 2.3 If the Executive agrees to adopt any of the recommendations of the review, it should state who will be responsible for delivering each of the adopted recommendations. The Corporate Management Team (CMT) has had prior sight of the report and has identified a CMT member to take responsibility for each recommendation, if adopted.
- 2.4 If the Executive decides **not** to adopt any of the recommendations, it must specifically state why, as prescribed by the Local Government Act 2007.

3. Contact Details

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Extract from the Minutes of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 6 August 2009.

“Resolved that the Executive be recommended to accept the Task and Finish Review’s recommendations subject to the changes shown in bold below:

- (1) In line with Circular 02/2009, the Council should initiate discussions with landowners and developers for the release of immediate short term employment land opportunities at Nerrols, Creech Heathfield and Walford Cross **and other suitable sustainable sites** for up to 5,000 square metres (around 2 hectares per site). **Such discussions should aim to encourage the owners of land to release sites to businesses, wherever possible, on a freehold rather than a leasehold basis;**
- (2) In line with Circular 02/2009, the threshold for out-of-centre office proposals for requiring a sequential assessment be raised to 1,000 square metres. This should enable additional windfall opportunities to come forward in the short term;
- (3) A strategic employment site of about 25 hectares **with good access to both the M5 Motorway and the A358** should be brought forward in the medium/long term, through the LDF. **The Council recognise that it needed to collaborate closely with all relevant agencies if it wished to build in flexibility into the Core Strategy. The owners of any potential site identified should again be encouraged to release sites to businesses, wherever possible, on a freehold rather than a leasehold basis;**
- (4) To progress a strategic **employment** site it was also recommended that a working group be set up and led by **the Strategic Director, involving** Economic Development, Project Taunton **and representatives of all relevant agencies**, a Councillor representative **and others as appropriate** with the purpose of developing an evidence base and proposal for the LDF Core Strategy. **Consideration should be given to a representative from Sedgemoor District Council being invited to sit on the Working Group.** As part of this process there should be community engagement with the parishes that would be affected. It was recommended that the strategic employment site should provide opportunities for major inward investment **and relocation of existing sites** to Taunton. It was accepted development (non Class A1) would be necessary to fund the initial infrastructure to open up the site, but the total proportion of floor space for such uses should remain ancillary (around 10%) and focus on medium sized office suites (300 – 1,000 square metres) in order to remain

consistent with Government policy and to avoid undermining Firepool as the strategic office site for the Taunton Strategically Significant City and Town (SSCT). **Such a Working Group should report back to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee within 4 months, with a progress report;**

- (5) The Executive be requested to identify the specific partners for the Working Group which would be led by Taunton Deane with the process and reporting back arrangements (to ensure progress was measured) being led by the Strategic Director, Joy Wishlade.”



Executive

Task and Finish Review

A Review into Employment Land in Taunton



Taunton Deane Borough Council: Executive A Task and Finish Review into Employment Land in Taunton



Introduction by Councillor Norman Cavill

Chairman of the Employment Land Task and Finish Review

There can be no doubt that in recent years there have been several occasions when opportunities for inward investment within the Taunton area have been missed and companies wishing to expand have moved away.

This Task and Finish Group was tasked to assist in resolving and reversing this situation. We have had the benefit of reports clearly showing that business requires a variety of sites that we presently do not have allocated and an analysis of the existing allocations has resulted in a re-evaluation.

However this Group was also attended by representatives including consultants, professional agents and developers as well as officers from Taunton Deane, Somerset County Council and other statutory agencies.

As you will see from the report there was no doubt at all from those representing the private sector, that Taunton is chronically short of a major strategic site, required in the near future, which would complement Firepool. If the employment opportunities required over the next 20 years are to be provided then short, medium and long term sites are required.

This is in spite of the fact that businesses and consumers are experiencing the worst recession since the 1930s and that global warming is a reality driving the need to transition to a more sustainable economy that recognises and protects the heritage of Taunton and the surrounding natural environment.

This does not mitigate the urgent need for employment land, but rather, further emphasises the need to create local jobs in Taunton within sustainable employment sites.

The Economic Development Manager is developing a green job strategy that will be essential in stimulating the recovery from the current economic downturn. It

will promote the greening of existing jobs through more efficient use of resources, and stimulate new jobs by helping to develop skills, innovation and new technologies, which will contribute to the strengthening of the green knowledge economy but also the low carbon energy sector within Taunton.

In short we need to find the will and the way to break the mould of past years, and expedite the provision and allocation of these sites. This must become one of our primary objectives, if we are to have any future standing in the South West.

Councillor Norman P Cavill
July 2009

Acknowledgements

Ralph Willoughby-Foster

Planning Policy Advisor, Taunton Deane Borough Council

Roger Mitchinson

Senior Policy Officer, Taunton Deane Borough Council

Mark Green

Project Taunton

Philip Sharratt

Interim Economic Development Manager, Taunton Deane Borough Council

Background to the Review

Why do a review on this subject?

A growing body of evidence suggests that the demand for employment land and premises is outstripping the supply within Taunton. In particular, Taunton Deane Borough Council is aware of the strong private sector feeling that there is a shortage of available employment land and that there is not the choice of premises or sites available to meet the future needs of indigenous business growth nor of potential inward investors.

There appears to be a need for small sites in the short and medium term, to provide smaller industrial and office premises of less than 10,000 sq ft with a choice of tenures and a need for a medium/longer term strategic site to attract high value inward investment that will complement the office development at Firepool.

It is important to quantify the apparent need that exists and examine the current suitability of sites identified for employment uses in the Taunton Deane Local Plan. It is understood that of the 70-80 hectares allocated in the Local Plan only 2 or 3 hectares in the Taunton area are currently capable of being brought forward for development.

The ready availability of employment sites in Taunton is an important issue which needs to be addressed. Taunton has Growth Point status and is one of the Governments eight 'Priority Places', but does not have sufficient employment land in the short term to accommodate the growth and diversification of the economy that will allow Growth Point targets to be achieved.

It was acknowledged that many companies have relocated their operations to Exeter, Yeovil and other adjoining towns due to the lack of availability of appropriate sites within Taunton to accommodate their growth requirements. However, the preferred choice of location for many of these businesses had been Taunton.

It could be argued that Taunton has an excellent strategic position, equal or better than their final relocation choice and there is anecdotal evidence that a growing number of Inward Investment Companies have considered relocating to Taunton but were unable to be offered any suitable site. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that there is a lack of appropriate employment sites and that this factor is truncating the economic potential of Taunton.

It is clear that Taunton will have to deliver a wide diversity of employment if it is to achieve the sustainable growth targets of the future. Blackbrook Business Park was the last sizeable allocation made in Taunton and that was almost 25 years ago. If Taunton is in any way to realise its economic potential identified within the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) then alterations and additions to its present employment land allocation need to be made.

Definitions and Abbreviations

- The Government Office for the South West - (GOSW)
- Strategically Significant Towns and Cities - (SSCT)
- Local Development Framework - (LDF)
- The Town and Country Planning (Consultation) (England) Direction 2009 - (Circular 02/2009)

Membership of the Review

Councillor Norman Cavill (chairman)

Councillor Habib Farbahi

Councillor Terry Murphy

Councillor Jayne O'Brien

Councillor Mrs Vivienne Stock-Williams

Councillor Mrs Mary Whitmarsh

Councillor John Williams

Terms of Reference

This review is subject to the following terms of reference:-

- Review the Strategic Employment Sites currently available and recommend whether they ought to remain in the Local Plan;
- Identify locations for alternative Strategic Employment Sites which could be more readily available for a wide range and types of businesses;
- Establish what could be achieved through the preparation of the current Local Development Framework (LDF) whilst considering how lengthy potential delays to land coming forward for development may be overcome;
- Undertake consultations with interested parties;
- To consider how we should work with statutory bodies such as the Highways Agency and others to enable any proposed sites to be brought forward; and
- Make recommendations to the Executive.

At the first meeting the group acknowledged that it did not intend to duplicate work already being undertaken by the LDF Steering Group and that any recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group would feed into the preparation of the Core Strategy and the LDF.

Evidence Taken, Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Taunton's Economy

The Task and Finish Group has identified that there is a need for Taunton to diversify the employment base and to increase private sector knowledge intensive activity that will provide choices of employment opportunities, retain talent within the area and attract higher wage earners to Taunton Deane.

The Local Economic Assessment, undertaken during January 2009, has shown that Taunton's economy is not thriving as it should and is overly dependant on public administration and low value consumer-led private sector activity to provide employment growth. See Taunton Deane Local Economic Assessment, Geoeconomics, February 2009.

The Government Office for the South West (GOSW) recommend that as Taunton is a Growth Point for the South West it is important that it should be investigating what restrictions it is facing and how these could be removed. The GOSW also recognise the need for flexibility in Taunton's economic growth in order to adapt to changes in the economic situation and to meet local need.

It was suggested to the group that the employment land opportunities in Taunton are not diverse enough and that this is evident in the low take up of allocated employment land for business use. It was stated that the Firepool development would not be appropriate to meet the needs of all growing local businesses and that it would not satisfy the diversity of requirements of potential inward investors, including high value manufacturing and design and production operations, or smaller operations requiring less than 10,000 sq ft of office space.

2. The Taunton Deane Employment Land and Premises Survey

During January 2009, questionnaires were distributed to businesses and public sector organisations within the Taunton Economic Zone. A total of 7,200 questionnaires were distributed with 884 returned completed - a significant increase on the 400 responses received when the questionnaire was last distributed in 2006.

The responses represented the views of a cross section of organisations across sectors, at ratios of around 30% industrial uses, 31% wholesale or retail, 23% office space, and 15% other including education, health, and hospitality uses:-

Agriculture, Food and Fisheries	5%
Manufacturing	12%
Construction	9%

Wholesale and Retail	31%
Hotel, Restaurant (including Tourism)	8%
Transport and Storage	4%
Real Estate and Business Services	6%
Public Admin and Community	6%
Education, Health and social work	7%
Other	11%

Of those that responded to the question about turnover 82% had a turnover of less than £2 million, 14% had a turnover between £2 million - £25 million and 4% had a turnover of £25 million or more, which is not unrepresentative of the structure of the local economy.

When asked if their present business premises were appropriate for their current needs, 11% of those responding reported that their premises situation was poor/very poor, indicating that if they had not already explored alternatives that they would need to plan to relocate within the next 3 year strategic cycle and that a further 34% of those responding only rated their current premises situation as “adequate for now”.

On this basis it is safe to assume that the lack of appropriate or suitable premises is a factor that has been given consideration within the decision making process to meet the growth aspirations of 45% of employers within the Taunton Economic Zone and may be a factor that is limiting the growth of employment opportunities for local residents and preventing the diversification of the local economy.

In terms of future requirements, these organisations require a choice of tenures, including easy-in/easy-out, rented, leasehold, freehold serviced and freehold land with premises predominantly of less than 10,000 sq ft, though there remains a significant proportion of organisations looking for premises within the range 10,000 sq of – 20,000 sq ft and larger than 20,000 sq ft.

Of these larger premises, Firepool will meet the needs of the larger office users requiring 10,000 sq ft plus, but it is recognised that there is currently no site available to accommodate the needs of those requiring larger manufacturing or production premises, or those with large warehousing and distribution operations.

50% of the respondents felt there was insufficient choice in employment space to meet their future needs and, in particular, identified that there was a shortage of small workshop/manufacturing space, premises for wholesale/warehousing or distribution operations and smaller office space.

The most important factors, beyond appropriateness, in determining what would compose suitable premises were cost and availability of parking, which is not surprising as the two most important factors to growing Small and Medium

Enterprises (SMEs) is cashflow and recruitment of a qualified and dedicated workforce.

The respondents were offered a number of options of 'preferred locations', including existing or planned employment areas and other areas to provide a complete choice around Taunton (North, East, South, and West) including existing sites within Wellington and Bridgwater. The top 4 locations identified were:-

- Firepool;
- East of Motorway (access to Junction 25);
- North Taunton; and
- Monkton Heathfield.

Whilst it might be expected that Firepool would have appeared close to the top of the list due to the publicity and anticipation of the regeneration of the town centre and its proximity to the town centre and the railway station, there is no significant employment allocation east of the motorway at Junction 25. There is a large allocation of employment land at Monkton Heathfield (14 ha) within the urban extension and a small allocation of employment land within what is currently planned as a mixed use housing scheme at Nerrols Farm where a total land allocation of 2 ha may be available for development in the short term.

The future of Taunton lies in the creation and growth of its indigenous business and despite the fact that the survey was undertaken during January 2009 when news coverage of the economic crisis was at its peak, there are a large number of businesses who are optimistic about the future.

Over half of the respondents were anticipating year on year growth of 5% or more, with 14% of respondents forecasting growth in excess of 15%, but the lack of available and appropriate premises of the size and tenure required by these organisations will have the effect of limited growth or forcing growth to occur outside of the Taunton Economic Zone.

Taunton is a Growth Point and the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) identifies that to meet the employment requirements of the proposed housing growth an additional 16,500 jobs will need to be created. Respondents were asked what the 'big issue' was for them and 21% felt that it was issues to do with planning and premises, which came second only after the recession at 32%.

Respondents were also asked how they felt Taunton Deane Borough Council could help them and 29% felt that improvements to the planning process and availability of premises were areas where the Council could improve their support. 53% of respondents felt that the Council does nothing to help or actively hinders local businesses.

Frome is not a recognised Growth Point and yet there are 42.9 ha of employment land being brought forward in the short term.

Across Mendip there are further employment developments being brought forward including one site of 8 ha that is outside a settlement limit and the current LDF, but the needs of the local area are providing motivation for their Forward Planning, Development Management and Economic Development Teams to work together to overcome the planning problems that might at first sight appear to produce barriers to this development succeeding in being passed through the planning process.

If, as a result of the lack of allocated employment land in Taunton that is financially viable and attractive to the private sector to bring forward for development and can, and is likely to be, brought forward within the next strategic business planning cycle of 3 to 5 years providing the mix of tenures and range of premises that will meet the needs of these growing indigenous businesses, then these ambitious Growth Point targets for employment growth will not be achieved.

The findings of the survey are that the lack of employment land and appropriate premises in Taunton is an issue of such significance that solutions need to be found now as part of the LDF process.

3. The Future of Taunton

Building on the Local Economic Assessment, during March 2009 the Economic Development Team worked with Professor Mark Hepworth and the Geoeconomics Team to produce a vision for the future of the Taunton economy. Within this study further detailed analysis of the economy was undertaken which highlighted that the 16,500 job creation target within the RSS was understated.

What Professor Hepworth describes as the 'inconvenient truth' is that around 4,000 jobs will be lost in the recession and that upwards of 20,000 new local jobs must be created between 2011 and 2026. Furthermore, a higher proportion of these jobs than before have to be concentrated in high skill, high paid occupations, with private sector knowledge intensive jobs being created at a rate of 2:1 to total jobs created in order to diversify the local economy and increase average earnings within Taunton Deane to the national average.

However, it was also revealed that 36% of the 60,000 jobs in Taunton Deane are part-time, against a regional average of 28% and a national average of 24%. Taunton is the number one part-time economy in the Country and to reduce the number of part-time jobs to the regional average will require creating an additional 4,800 full time jobs and an additional 7,500 full time jobs to bring part-time working down to the national average.

Therefore, the challenge is to create 28,000 new full time jobs between 2011 and 2026 growing high value employment at a rate 200% faster than low value administration and consumer-led employment.

It was also recognised that the local economy was imbalanced toward public sector employment, which provides around 40% of the total employment across Taunton Deane and contributes significantly to the knowledge intensive activity locally, whilst the bulk of private sector employment was in low value consumer-led activity such as retail, hospitality and tourism.

In order to provide choices of employment opportunities, which is required to retain talent and attract graduates, the local economy needs to diversify toward private sector knowledge intensive employment such as cultural and creative industries, digital and green technology businesses and programmes of activity to drive demand for 'green collar' employment, health and education establishments to attract talent including innovation centres and a physical central place for higher education in Taunton, production and construction businesses and activity including building modern industrial estates, a green building programme and social innovation to drive the adoption of sustainable energy production within mixed use urban extensions.

The "Envisioning the Future of the Taunton Economy" report suggests that Taunton is heading for gradual economic decline. There is a need for strong leadership from the Council to reverse this trend and for employment land to be made available to meet the needs of indigenous business growth and attract high value Inward Investment to Taunton, in addition to the opportunities for large office users created at Firepool.

The Firepool site will create 5,000 new jobs and the challenge for the Project Taunton Team is to ensure that this employment achieves the 3,300 high value private sector jobs required from the development to contribute to the diversification of the local economy. However, the real challenge is to create 28,000 new jobs of which 18,500 need to be high value private sector employment opportunities. Firepool, as the only strategic employment site available to Taunton will not accommodate this growth in employment and it is self evident that an additional strategic site of greater size than Firepool is required beyond the secondary employment sites already identified, including the 14 ha at Monkton Heathfield.

The Group feels that the Envisioning report, and subsequent work being commissioned by the Economic Development Unit, should be incorporated into the Corporate Strategy.

4. The Stage 1 Employment Land Review

The Stage 1 Employment Land Review was agreed at the Task and Finish Group

and signed off by Councillor Coles. It assesses existing Land Supply with Taunton Deane to inform allocations and requirements in the emerging Core Strategy. It was prepared Taunton Deane following broad agreement on findings through consultations with agents and developers.

A number of organisations took part in the consultation process, notably Summerfield Developments, Greenslade Taylor Hunt, Hatfield White, Alder King and Somerset County Council. A summary of the responses from those who took part in the consultation are contained in Appendix A. Appendices B, C, and D contain detailed responses to the Employment Land Review from Summerfield and WYG.

As a result of the consultation a number of sites were either removed from available supply (for example Henlade due to viability of development and sustainability) or retained but excluded from the totals as development was unlikely to result in additional employment (for example Priorswood former land fill site).

The Strategy Team and Planning Policy Advisor produced a report for this Group attached at Appendix E. The group decided to adopt the recommendations made in this report. The main points are summarised below.

The Stage 1 Employment Land Review Assessment identifies:-

- 55.5 ha of employment land available over the RSS period (2006-2026) for **industrial and other** employment uses within Taunton Deane, of which:-
- 22.2 ha within the Taunton SSCT (Strategically Significant Cities and Towns).
- 25.95 ha within the Wellington area.

In Taunton:-

- 8 ha immediately and short term available (within 3 years) comprised of sites at Taunton Trading Estate (5.2 ha), Crown land (1.95 ha), Courtlands (0.8 ha) and Frobisher Way (0.32 ha).
- 14 ha available within the medium term (3-10 years). All within Monkton Heathfield.

Office Use

- 100,000 sq.m. of commitments within the period 2006-2026. Nearly all of

this is within the Taunton SSCT and most is identified through the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan.

Concerns

- Lack of short, medium and longer term opportunities within the Taunton SSCT for industrial/other land.
- Now that Blackbrook is nearing completion there is a lack of current opportunities for medium sized office suites (300-1000 sq.m.).

Options for short term release outside of Local Plan / LDF

- Under Circular 02/2009 site areas of approximately 2 hectares for non office use would not need to be referred to GOSW as a departure.
- It also defines Major development in the Town Centre as under 1,000 sq.m. Thus potentially allowing additional small scale out of centre office sites.
- In line with this the following sites could be investigated to be bought forward in the short term:-
 - Crown land at Nerrols (c2 ha);
 - Creech Heathfield (part of c8 ha total);
 - Walford Cross (c2 ha); and
 - Additional windfall out of centre office sites may also arise with the higher office 'threshold'.

It is unlikely that larger sites for immediate release could you be brought forward outside of the Development Plan system.

5. Taunton's Infrastructure and Junction 25

Taunton is in the centre of the South West region and needs to further improve its road infrastructure if it going to attract additional businesses. This is a challenge which needs to be embraced and overcome.

It was emphasized by consultants and developers that potential sites to attract businesses must have the correct location as well as good infrastructure. Strategic sites such as those in Exeter and Weston-Super-Mare, which had retail, office and industrial units were near the M5 Motorway and these are the sort of sites which should be identified in Taunton.

6. Junction 25

- The Task and Finish Group was advised that it is unlikely that another Motorway junction will be built, which had previously been suggested as an idea to service the Monkton Heathfield employment site.
- Whilst the Government has been calling for Taunton to increase its economic viability, the Highways Agency has in the past been reluctant to support increased use at Junction 25. As proactive leadership has demonstrated in the past with campaigning for the proposed dualing of the A358, it was agreed that the Council should be engaging with the Highways Agency and other authorities to enable the timely and correct investment to be brought forward to achieve a new strategic site.

Somerset County Council have said that although they do not believe Junction 25 should be the key determinate, as it would be expensive, it does need to be addressed and consideration should be given by linking it to the Henlade By-Pass. They have provided reassurance that if Taunton Deane has viable ideas they would work with the Highways Agency and the Council to achieve them.

- The land east of Junction 25 is considered of high value for employment use and it was agreed that it should be a priority for the Council to work with the Highways Agency for this strategic site to come forward. Particularly as the Park and Ride, once it is available, will significantly reduce the amount of traffic movement coming from the A358 direction.
- Future funding of £1 billion is available for transport improvements under the Regional Funding Allocation 2 (RFA 2). Taunton Deane needs to enlist the assistance of the RDA and others to support its bid for the Junction 25 improvements.
- Those representatives of the business sector gave their assessments and agreed that the only site that satisfied the requirements for a new strategic site was the land adjacent to Junction 25

7. Alternative Sites to Land East of Junction 25

- It is important that potential projects are undertaken properly, for example any development at the Monkton Heathfield and A38 sites which would provide sustainable urban extensions with homes and offices. These developments could then lead the way for other similar sites, such as Galmington and Bindon Road. Although they would not be strategic sites, they would be significant in providing employment sites. However, the developers felt that it would be difficult to bring these sites forward without significant infrastructure investment to make them financially viable. The highways access would not be good enough for a strategic site.

- The Monkton Heathfield site could be bought forward in isolation without the rest of the housing development.
- There is an underlying need to find sites which are accessible. Therefore, the priority is to allocate sites near major roads in order to provide a good infrastructure.
- Apart from the Blackbrook site which is almost full, the only other site presently suitable for offices is Firepool. There is concern that there is a lack of sites for the types of business going to Blackbrook and that the Firepool site would not provide this type of development.

8. Funding

- The Regional Infrastructure Fund (RIF) produced about £2m for the flood storage scheme at Long Run Farm which will facilitate regeneration of Taunton Town Centre.
- The Local Transport Plan has included:-
 - The North West Taunton Package which provided the Silk Mills Bridge over the mainline Railway, a new Park and Ride site and bus priority measures.
 - Cambria Park and Ride is under construction.
 - Taunton Third Way and Northern Inner Distributor Road have planning permission and funding.
- To date Taunton has received about £9m of New Growth Point Funding. However there is a need to achieve Growth Targets if we are to be successful in future and avoid a potential payback situation.
- The total provision of road infrastructure can restrict the development of a small to medium site. This severely limits the number of potential sites around Taunton.
- To give this some idea of the costs of improvements. The Creech Castle Junction, which is to be funded by the RFA 2, would cost in the region of £20m. The Henlade bypass will cost £30m - £40m.

9. Recommendations

1. In line with Circular 02/2009, the Council initiates discussions with landowners and developers for the release of immediate short term employment land opportunities at Nerrols, Creech Heathfield and Walford Cross for up to 5,000 sq.m. (around 2 hectares per site);
2. In line with Circular 02/2009, the threshold for out-of-centre office proposals for requiring a sequential assessment be raised to 1,000 sq.m. This should enable additional windfall opportunities to come forward in the short term.
3. A strategic employment site of about 25 hectares be brought forward in the medium - longer term, through the LDF. (Any attempt to bring forward a strategic site outside the LDF would be blocked by the Highways Agency and possibly GOSW and SW Councils).
4. To progress a strategic site it is also recommended that a Working Group be set up and led by Economic Development or Project Taunton, involving a Taunton Deane Strategy Officer, and representatives of Somerset County Council Transport, Highways Agency, Environment Agency, Regional Development Agency/SW Councils, developers and agents and a Councillor representative with the purpose of developing an evidence base and proposal for the LDF Core Strategy. As part of this process there should be community engagement with the parishes that would be affected. It is recommended that the strategic employment site should provide opportunities for major inward investment to Taunton. It is accepted that an element of office and non Class B employment generating development (non Class A1) will be necessary to fund the initial infrastructure to open up the site, but the total proportion of floor space for such uses should remain ancillary (around 10%) and focus on medium sized office suites (300-1,000 sq.m.) in order to remain consistent with Government policy and to avoid undermining Firepool as the strategic office site for the SSCT; and
5. The Executive be requested to identify the specific partners for the Working Group which would be led by Taunton Deane with the process and reporting back arrangements (to ensure progress was measured) being led by the Strategic Director, Joy Wishlade.

10. Conclusions

Taunton is strategically placed in the centre of the South West. An attractive

location for businesses but without the required infrastructure and choice of employment sites.

The Task and Finish Group have recognised that Taunton is a Growth Point for the South West where there is a need to diversify and attract higher wage earners to the area. There are a large number of businesses that are optimistic about the future, but the lack of premises available may contribute to businesses leaving the area.

Taunton needs to improve its road infrastructure before it can attract the right business. The Firepool type developments will not be wanted by all potential businesses coming to the area and so other business types must be considered, such as high value manufacturing, design and production companies. The need for flexibility in Taunton's economic development in order to adapt to changes in the market has been identified.

Taunton has received funding to improve its infrastructure and must obtain further funding from the RFA 2 for development from 2014-2019. It should be noted that the figure of £1billion is for all the seven Counties of the South West Region.

Members from the private sector have informed the Group that it would be difficult to bring the alternative sites forward without significant infrastructure investment to make them financially viable. Taunton Deane should therefore be pro-active in engaging with the Highways Agency to enable investment to be brought forward to achieve Growth Point targets and enable development of land east of Junction 25.

The Group recommends that a new strategic site in excess of 20 hectares to the east of the M5 Motorway at Junction 25 is required as a minimum, in addition to the continued growth of smaller sites. Within the short term the only site available for immediate occupation is Chelston (Westpark 26) in Wellington, which means that there is little or no significant volume of employment land available around Taunton within the next three to five years.

It is essential for the economic wellbeing of Taunton that this Strategic site is brought forward as quickly as can be done.