

2009 Employment Land Task and Finish Review

Commentary against Recommendations

The five recommendations from the 2009 task and finish review are highlighted in bold italic, with brief commentary appearing below each recommendation.

Much of the progress that has been made has been dependent upon the Council's role as enabler and influencer, rather than direct deliverer, of the schemes described. TDBC funding contributions have certainly played a part in levering in additional external support – such as the contribution towards Junction 25 enhancement and commercial loans to enable the cricket club development and rail station enhancement. The earmarking of significant New Homes Bonus funding (£16.6m) for growth has played a key role in this respect, freeing up ability for the Council to invest. The Council has also decided to invest directly in certain growth schemes, such as the Coal Orchard and Lisieux Way Technology Park.

Looking to the future, the new Council will be resourced to serve an increased political appetite for direct commercial investment, where business cases demonstrate a solid return and/or wider economic and community benefit.

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);

- Taunton Deane Core Strategy Policy CP2 'Economy' provides for 11,900 additional jobs within Taunton Deane with an emphasis on provision in and around Taunton. The urban extensions provided in the Core Strategy and SADMP all have mixed use elements including employment land. In practice it has proved difficult to bring forward these identified short term employment land opportunities.

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.

- Taunton Deane Core Strategy policy CP3 states that proposals for main town centre uses on edge of centre or out of centre sites will be assessed sequentially. In addition, proposers of retail schemes of above 500 sq.m. in such locations will also be required to undertake a retail impact assessment.

- Paragraph 89 of the revised 2018 NPPF has removed 'offices' from the list of types of 'town centre development' for which impact assessments should be required where they are proposed outside town centres.

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).

- A Local Development Order (LDO) for the new strategic employment site (Nexus 25) adjacent to J25 has been adopted by TDBC (2018), creating a high quality 'green campus' with potential to accommodate over 3000 high quality jobs.
- The T&F report concluded that *'Taunton needs to improve its road infrastructure before it can attract the right business'*, and that *'Taunton Deane ... should therefore be proactive in engaging with the Highways Agency to enable investment to be brought forward'*. Taunton has since won considerable infrastructure funding, including a successful 'growth deal' bid of c.£13m for the enhancement of Junction 25, which also received planning consent from SCC in early 2018. Growth deal funding (£6.4m) has also been secured for improvements along the Toneway Corridor, linking J25 towards the town centre. Both schemes are led by SCC with support from TDBC and are critical to unlocking Nexus 25 and its full growth potential, as well as the wider growth of Taunton. The funding and opening of the Northern Inner Distributor Road (now called Trenchard Way) also relieves traffic congestion in the town centre and facilitates the development of the Firepool and rail station sites.
- Staying with road infrastructure, Highways England (formerly Highways Agency) have committed, after a long and hard fought campaign, to the dualling of the A358 between Southfields Roundabout on the A303 and the M5 at Taunton (Somerset's busiest 'A' road). Three route options have been consulted upon (investment range £250-£400m), with a preferred route announcement expected in autumn 2018. This route is part of a wider National Strategic Infrastructure Project (NSIP) to create a new 'expressway' from London to the south west. All three route options have been designed in a way that enables the Nexus 25 strategic employment site to come forward.
- The T&F report is silent in respect of rail infrastructure as an important catalyst for business, yet Taunton also benefits from an excellent location on the national rail network, with regular high speed trains to/from London and other major towns and cities. A more frequent (hourly) fast service to/from London will commence in 2019, with new trains offering c. 25% additional seating capacity. Growth deal funding of £4.6m has also been secured for the enhancement of Taunton Rail Station, comprising a new multi storey car park, south facing forecourt and ticket hall and public transport interchange. These

works are supported by commercial loan from TDBC and will also commence in 2019.

- The award of Garden Town status in early 2017 has many benefits, but principal among these is a greater likelihood of securing additional funding for key infrastructure. This is evidenced by recent success in bids for capacity funding and Housing Infrastructure Funding (marginal viability and forward fund). Whilst mainly about accelerating housing delivery, much of the key infrastructure funded will also support economic growth.

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.

- A delivery team led by TDBC and comprising Highways England, Somerset County Council, the Local Enterprise Partnership, Summerfield Developments (landowner and lead developer) and the Environment Agency was established in 2014/15, with a common aim – enshrined in a shared memorandum of understanding - to facilitate the delivery of a new high quality strategic employment site for Taunton at Junction 25. This provided an important forum for partners to identify and resolve some of the key infrastructure issues (mainly transport related) to enable the site to come forward and
- Parish Councils in the area were informed of progress at every key stage of the process in bringing the employment site forward. Consultation was undertaken both informally and formally during the LDO process leading to adoption. Business and wider community engagement and consultation also featured throughout.

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 Wislade.

- Partners were identified as described above (section 4).
- Progress was reported and monitored by a cross party steering group of TDBC members (Growth Steering Group) and also by partners on the Taunton Economic Advisory Board (recently renamed Taunton Strategic Advisory Board).

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