

SWT Scrutiny Committee - 7 October 2020

Present: Councillor Gwil Wren (Chair)

Councillors Libby Lisgo, Ian Aldridge, Sue Buller, Norman Cavill, Dixie Darch, Habib Farbahi, Ed Firmin, Dave Mansell, Derek Perry, Phil Stone, Keith Wheatley, Simon Coles and Roger Habgood

Officers: Andrew Randell, Marcus Prouse, Dawn Adey, Tim Bacon and Joe Wharton

Also Present: Councillors Chris Booth, Marcus Kravis, Richard Lees, Sue Lees, Janet Lloyd, Peter Pilkington, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Mike Rigby, Francesca Smith, Andrew Sully, Ray Tully, Sarah Wakefield, Alan Wedderkopp, Brenda Weston and Loretta Whetlor

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

55. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Hunt, Thwaites and Wedderkopp.

Councillors Buller, Coles and Habgood attended as substitutes.

56. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Mansell	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Councillor Buller declared a personal interest as an owner of a property in the vicinity of Riverside Place, Taunton.

57. Public Participation

A statement was provided by Mr David Redgewell and set out below. The response following the meeting would be circulated to members of the Scrutiny Committee.

With the Covid-19 level raised in the south west there is a need for social distancing at Bus stops and enhanced cleaning, on bus infrastructure and in Taunton town centre.

Firstly in Taunton bus stops at corporation street, castle way and The parade at time have been unsafe with passengers in queues not social distancing. The Gazette has also reported on this issue and on Facebook. I witnessed the problem myself on the way to Taunton Hospital.

This need looking at with Somerset west and Taunton Council, Somerset County Council, the Transport authority. There is an urgent needs to look at Notices and Barriers like those in Bristol, Exeter town centre and bus stations, Bath, Gloucester and Cheltenham. Social distancing and face coverings and notices in bus and coach stations and on bus shelters to keep passengers safe.

In Taunton, maybe marshalling journeys at peak times would benefit passengers, and using part of the bus station yard to spread the queues out at stands in Taunton town centre would help. With the problems being worse at peak times or when First group south west duplicates the single decker route to Minehead due to low Bridges on the West Somerset railway or when extra bus operate off castle way bus stops with National Express Coaches and bus operated by Dartline to Seaton or Hatch green bus service.

These are small stands with not much shelter s which means in wet weather social distancing is not happening.

As a double decker bus only carry 33 and 18 on a single means that social distancing at present bus stops were very difficult, with too many buses are on the stands in the town centre. With departure a to Taunton town centre to wells bus station 29 route for Bristol and Bath Taunton town centre 54 to Lanport, somerton and yeovi bus station 21 Taunton to Bridgwater ,Highbridge and Burnham for Weston super mare 22 Taunton town centre to Wellington and Tiverton 99 Taunton town centre to chard 30 Taunton town centre to chard and Axminster for lyme regis, Bridport and Weymouth and Dorchester. Town service s and park and ride services. The Government is keen to keep the public transport network safe during the Covid 19 outbreak . To many buses are on the stands in Taunton town centre.

The issue of a bus strategy and consultation on improving bus waiting facilities in Taunton town centre, and using part of the bus station to allow proper safe social distancing on the bus network in Taunton town.

The guidance from the department for transport and regulation is the local authorities need to improve public infrastructure cleaning social with Notices pavements widening mark out notices and signs on bus stops and shelters.

Passengers in Taunton need the councils Bridgwater, Wells ,Frome ,Weston super mare and Gloucester to improve bus stops shelters and plan a new bus and coach station for Taunton. As travel watch south west and Transport focus have said we need to improve passengers facilities in the Town urgently this is a

local authorities responsibility with the Somerset county council the local transport authority and the south west transport board.

Exeter city council and North Somerset council in Weston super mare had a new bus and coach station under construction and at First Great western railway station in Taunton an interchange is under construction to ensure public transport information is correct Taunton and Somerset railway stations.

We welcome the ongoing work on bus and coach service by bus and coach station facilities are as important as reopening Wellington station and link Train service between Taunton and Minehead and bus interchange facilities need improvement at Taunton bus station.

Thank you for keeping the public transport network operating in difficult situations.

David Redgewell south west transport network and Railfuture Severnside.

58. **Access to Information - Exclusion of the Press and Public**

Resolved that:- The Scrutiny Committee Recommended that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the next item of business on the ground that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 respectively of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, namely information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

59. **Regeneration of Firepool: Business case for Phase 1 delivery (Infrastructure and Block 1)**

The report was presented by Councillor Kravis and the Assistant Director – Asset Development Projects and Assistant Director – Major and Special Projects.

The report was considered at Council following earlier reports and approval that progressed the regeneration of the Firepool site from the previous aborted scheme into the revised, fit for purpose, residential and leisure use approach of 2020. The scheme had been broken into 6 blocks that could be delivered in separate phases to reduce the overall financial commitment and risk at any one time, and to allow the plan to adapt to social or economic requirements.

The report outlined the business case for the commencement of the first full phase of infrastructure and utility work that is pre-requisite to bring the rest of the site forward, including flood defence, sewerage, electricity and water, along with some elements of public realm and car parking that were essential to unlock the remainder of the site and allow the development to progress.

It also described the business case for Block 1 and was self-contained and able to be delivered earlier in the programme.

The report recommended that the Phase 1 infrastructure works were delivered by the SPV, and that a subsidiary SPV would be created and the land in Block 1 transferred on

a long lease basis to the SPV for delivery of the construction phases and disposal/management of the assets on completion.

During the discussion the following comments and questions were raised:-

- The committee requested for phosphate levels on the Somerset levels impacting on the site needed to be reflected in the recommendations and risk assessment.
- Planning permission was in place, it was recognised that there was risk to the scheme if the construction of the development took place over a certain period.
- Phase 1 infrastructure costs were questioned. PWLB financing and risks of volatility in interest rates were considered. Understanding the implications was important in planning ahead.
- An Inflationary figure was included in costs.
- The scheme was flexible with conditions in the market, a venue was planned at the end of project but plan b could be explored depending on the market requirements.
- The scheme could make a return on elements of the scheme without the Homes England funding, although the viability of the second phase came into question.
- App 1.1 infrastructure costs were considered alongside the Homes England contribution towards a significant portion of infrastructure costs. Homes England funding was anticipated only on basis of building houses.
- The possibility of negotiating a long deadline due to the impact of the pandemic and the risk of timescale impacting any funding from homes England.
- The carry over debt from Firepool to Homes England was determined a Significant sum.
- Clarification was made that through SPV's – reports would come back to full council for approval for each project.
- There had been changes to the funding schemes with project officers waiting for clearer direction from government on funding programmes. When the funding is in place, commitment to the scheme could be made.
- Homes England were aware it's a mixed use scheme, their funding would contribute to support housing and infrastructure.
- The 151 Officer was confident in respect of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) for 50 years. Confident SPV would repay loan and mitigating the cost of MRP.
- A return on interest of SPV would mitigate impact on the authority.
- The Public Works Loan Board interest rates and borrowing rates were anticipated to remain low for the next 5-6 years. This was not the only option in the source of borrowing, and may not be the best value but a guide for the business case.
- The committee questioned if the scheme was ambitious enough or if it was too cautious.
- Few large scale providers of residential rental providers. Commercial landlords difficult undertaking, assurance was provided that the rates would be stress tested.
- There was a strong market for a high quality and up market rental product with a secure source of ongoing rental income. This would reduce the risk in the impact of selling the properties.
- SPV taxable on rents, could lead to a cashflow issues. The owner of the car parks was questioned alongside the Group and subsidiary SPV's. An adequate accounting system for the SPV was required.
- Concerns were expressed around traffic and potential risks around funding posed an issue in taking the scheme forward.
- Commercial activity was considered taxable in terms of council's loan to the SPV, professional tax advice would be sought for this.

- Repairs and maintenance rental model was determined as substantial. PWC advice appended to the SPV report. Tax mechanisms would be modelled through the scenarios for the benefit to be determined. The land would belong to the councils, the leasehold would belong to the Council.
- Provision of affordable housing on other sites could work out in respect of proportion attributed to the Firepool development. This would be considered but the committee urged to have some allocation of affordable housing on the site.
- The reference to a car club was noted along with the emphasis of this to minimise the need for the total number of cars to be owned by residents. Cycling provision was also encouraged to be in part of the scheme.
- Infrastructure was costed to deliver the appropriate amount of infrastructure on the site as a whole, if this was a leisure option this was not specific to the infrastructure planned.
- Zero carbon – air source or ground source heat pumps and solar panels were all considerations, there was ambition to build buildings to the highest quality and to buy in zero carbon solutions following this.
- Procuring a Modular housing provider and appointing them was a difficult balance between building the buildings to the best as you can and bolting on zero carbon technology.
- The committee were in favour of a long term project that would benefit the residents of Taunton including part of regeneration and building for the future. Economic benefits needed to be quantified, the socioeconomic benefit would need to be articulated outside of the facts of the investment.
- It was positive that there was flexibility in the site, along with term delivery if needed. The boulevard from the station through the town, investment detail in terms of the returns in numbers was requested between 3-4%
- Concerns were expressed around the market for the site and communications strategy.
- The economic benefits of the scheme questioned.
- Responses from consultees such as the environment agency has slowed down the scheme and technical documents. The CNCR strategy and design guide slowed to cross reference the plans. Out to consultation in December.
- Car parks won't be designed just for residents, those using leisure facilities would access these. Work on the boulevard would start early.
- The risk of recession and a drop in the market following the Covid-19 pandemic was a concern in the scheme development.
- A Communications document would be developed for residents in the town to promote the site.
- Allocations for electric vehicle charging points were questioned, these would be included and had been costed for both car parks.
- The Break-even point from the borrowing was requested and cost value per property information would be provided to the committee separately.
- The costs of the venue had been included as part of the costs of the delivery.
- The design layout was questioned and encouraging better use of the land for parking, utilising underground parking if possible.
- Members of the committee commended the work undertaken on the project and encouraged accurate project management going forward.

Resolved that Scrutiny Committee recommended to Executive and Full Council the recommendations numbered 2.1 to 2.8 within the confidential report and added an additional recommendation:

2.9 The committee request that a risk assessment be put in place recognising the recent Natural England advice around phosphates and potential impacts on the projects.”

All but one of the committee members agreed the recommendations with one abstention.

60. **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

The committee requested the following items be considered at a future meeting:-

- Commercial investment portfolio review.
- Interim Policy statement on planning.
- Electric vehicle charging strategy.
- Housing Infrastructure fund Review.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan be noted.

61. **Executive Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Executive Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

62. **Full Council Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Full Council Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Full Council Forward Plan be noted.

(The Meeting ended at 9.05 pm)

