

Full Council Meeting – 15 December 2020

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

SWT Local Plan Review:

We consulted on the Local Plan Issues and Options document at the beginning of 2020. An initial Consultation Report Part 1 summarising online responses was published in July and Part 2 reporting the more lengthy responses was published in October. As part of the “trawl for sites” we have received 103 suggestions from developers and others with interest in land. These have been logged and sorted into areas. Details can be found at:

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2454/swt-lp-io-consultation-report-stage-2-appx2.pdf>

I would urge councillors to familiarise themselves with the details. While there is no guarantee that a suggested site will ultimately be accepted into the local plan and from there be the subject of a successful planning application, it is likely that, Government intervention notwithstanding, most of the sites coming forward in the period to 2040, will be amongst this number.

The timetable of the Local Plan has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and so further evidence gathering and the Regulation 19 Draft Plan stage anticipated for Summer 2020 (as set out in the Local Development Scheme) has been delayed. Furthermore, the Government’s recent Planning Reform proposals and change to the calculation of housing need will impact upon the content and scope of the Local Plan so we need to review what this means for our Local Plan if the proposed changes are confirmed.

Additionally, the timetable is likely to be affected by the outcome of the unitary proposals for Somerset. Whichever unitary scenario emerges, a Local Plan would need to be produced to cover the whole of the new Local Planning Authority area. The background work and consultation so far on the Local Plan 2040 will still be of relevance to any new Local Plan for a unitary authority.

Wellington Station:

Work continues on the Strategic Outline Business Case for Wellington Station, which is due to be complete by the end of the year. This work is being funded by the Restoring Your Railways Fund. The Government’s recent spending review includes plans for a third round of the New Stations Fund, with an expanded pot of £32 million, which the project team intends to make a submission to.

Interim Policy Statement on Planning for the Climate Emergency:

A Draft Interim Policy Statement has been produced to provide additional explanation and guidance on our existing planning policies in relation to the climate emergency. Its principal purpose is to reiterate existing adopted planning policies and ensure that we are applying them to the best of their effect in tackling the Climate Emergency. The Draft Statement is due for consultation from 23 November 2020 – 4 January 2021.

Vacancies

Planning Specialist – the role was advertised for a 2nd time but attracted no applicants. The role will be re-advertised in January 2021.

Phosphates

We have recently advised Members that a number of planning applications will require a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) due to the letter we had received from Natural England about the high levels of phosphates in the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site. A copy of the advice letter/ advice note from Natural England provides a helpful explanation of the issues and the types of development affected and is available on our website at:

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning/phosphates-on-the-somerset-levels-and-moors/>

Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site

In light of a court Judgement (known as Dutch N), Natural England have advised SWT that, in light of the unfavourable condition of the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site, before determining a planning application that may give rise to additional phosphates within the catchment, competent authorities should undertake a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA).

To date, we have only been able to conclude one HRA and that is because mitigation was not required as it was concluded that the development would not create additional phosphates.

In order to move this matter forward we have commissioned consultants to undertake work on developing a phosphates calculator. This should then allow for an assessment and mitigation of the phosphates impacts in proposed new developments. The calculator will allow applicants to calculate their phosphate budget and mitigate to show with sufficient and reasonable certainty that the development does not adversely affect the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site. While this piece of work is being undertaken we will not be able to determine any of the affected planning applications unless developers are able to provide their own solution.

It is anticipated that this work will be concluded prior to Christmas but at present, I cannot guarantee that it will be achievable.

Planning Committee - I have formed the view that meetings of the Planning Committee continue to be lasting significantly longer than ought to be the case. I am working with the Chairman of the Committee and officers to devise means to see the smoother functioning of these meetings.

The reviews of the council's car parks continue with the first examining the future charging regime, including the 'first hour free' trial. I expect to report the initial findings and recommendations in the first quarter of 2021. The second undertaking will shadow the first but may take slightly longer to conclude and that will determine the adequacy of long-term strategic car parking availability across the district - Do we have the correct amount of parking in the right places?

East Street Pedestrianisation - We undertook a survey to gauge views of the pedestrianisation of East Street in order to determine how to manage this issue

going forward. It was the council's largest consultation ever, with in excess of 2,000 responses. A majority of respondents felt that the closure was a success and should be extended. Full details of the questions and responses can be found here:

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2458/east-reach-consultation-results.pdf>

Together with SCC, we decided to keep the street closed through Lockdown 2.0 given that many of the shops were fully open and many of those that weren't were open for click and collect. Given the short duration of Lockdown 2.0, it was also felt reopening it would cause confusion and disrupt reconfigured travel patterns. I will provide a verbal report on the next stages.

Active Travel - East Street

Extensive work consultation work has taken place on the scheme implemented over the summer. Following this, design work has started to change the scheme to allow for timed opening of the road at peak times, and to allow blue badge holders to park on the street during specific hours. This work will be subject to further consultation and Road Safety Audit verification, prior to implementation.

Government guidance and award of Active Travel P2 funding was published in November. The County wide active travel cell are absorbing this information with a view to deciding on which of the schemes submitted by the individual districts meet the revised criteria for grants before Christmas.

The Gateway Park and Ride reopened on 2 November 2020, following SCC's completion of highways works at the site. We continue to discuss how to improve the park and rides, the operation of which we subsidise, though the plan to take ownership of them has been severely dented first by Covid and then by local government reorganisation.

As a council we have objected to the Government's proposed changes to the Standard Method for calculating housing numbers, which would have an enormous impact on the district with as many as 24,000 homes needing to be built in the period to 2040. Likewise we have objected to the deeply unsatisfactory Government proposals to effectively do away with local plans and instead designate lands into three simple categories. Indeed the consultation appears to be trying to fix a problem that does not exist and we have responded accordingly.

Feasibility work - Cycling schemes

SWT are continuing to work towards feasibility studies with local cycling groups and other stakeholders on cycling infrastructure projects in the district, including links from Taunton to Wellington and Bishops Lydeard/Cotford St Luke. Dedicated resource is now working through the many complex issues, such as land ownership(s), funding and planning, with a view to bringing together detailed proposals.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

SWT continue to work with colleagues in SCC on refining and prioritising schemes within the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan, with the intention of developing detailed project delivery proposals.