

Full Council Meeting – 30 March 2021

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

The last year has been one of mixed outcomes, dominated as with everything, by Covid but with other significant external factors acting on our ability to achieve our desired outcomes.

The inability to meet in large groups quickly pushed the council to hold its meetings online, including meetings of the Planning Committee. These experiences have not been without their challenges but we have nonetheless determined a large number of planning applications in this way. We continue to seek ways of streamlining the decision-making process and, working with the Chair of the Planning Committee and senior officers, we will shortly be bringing forward a series of further recommendations in this regard. We have also recently engaged the Planning Advisory Service to make further improvement recommendations.

The Dutch N Case has had a tremendous effect on planning in the last 6 months. Members will be aware of the fact that the case has placed an effective moratorium on the approval of planning applications that would generate an additional phosphate loading on the river systems that feed the Somerset Levels and Moors. SWAT has led joint efforts to navigate a way through this huge local issue and has, in record time, produced a 'Phosphate calculator' to inform developers what additional phosphate loading their proposals would yield and therefore how much they will need to seek to remove from the river system. There remains considerable work to do on this issue but the process of unblocking the logjam has at least begun. Work on the longer-term strategic solution is expected to be complete by the Autumn.

The Local Plan has not progressed as quickly as we would have liked. This is due to the series of uncertainties placed in our way by government through:

- The consultation on a new standard method for housing calculation;
- The consultation on a new zoning-based form of planning control;
- The move to a unitary form of local council structure.

The proposed change to the standard method, now dropped, would have meant that instead of needing to accommodate an additional, perhaps, 5,000 new homes beyond those already allocated, in the period to 2040, we may have had to find space for a total of up to 24,000. This would have had enormous implications for our district. The proposal was near-universally derided and dropped some months later. However, it would have been impossible to continue substantive work on the local plan while this uncertainty remained. We, nevertheless, continued to gather information for the plan's evidence base. The Zoning consultation remains live but I do not expect it to emerge as government policy in anything like the original form. The proposal to reorganise Somerset's councils is currently under consultation and looks likely to be implemented between 2021 and 2023. In that context, on top of some difficulties caused by remote working, we have not made the progress that we otherwise would have done. Always a challenge, it is quite unlikely that we will

now be able to adopt a new local plan in the time left to this council. However, there are good reasons to press on with the work, not the least of which is to maintain greater control of planning decisions as our previous local plans age and offer less relevance. Even if we cannot adopt the new plan, its policies will assume greater weight in the decision-making process as it moves towards completion.

We have begun the process of reviewing the council's car parks. Is the charging structure right for us? Are our car parks located in the right places? These are two of the bigger questions that we will be seeking to answer this year.

Great progress has been made on reopening Wellington Railway Station. The group's bid to the New Stations Fund will be submitted to the DfT in May following the production of the Strategic Outline Business Case. All indications are incredibly positive about prospects and the project remains one of the council's key strategic objectives.

Park & Ride. We have successfully persuaded the county council to resume financial responsibility for its Park and Ride facilities in Taunton, removing our subsidy of £200,000, begun under TDBC. We continue to work with SCC to assure the future of the park and rides as well as to seek the modification of routes to take in new centres of heavy potential use generation.

Pedestrianisation. We have taken the decision permanently to pedestrianise St James Street following an extended trial. We are proud of the success that we have achieved in working with local traders, to overcome initial concerns and issues, and in working with them to help rebrand the area as The Specialist Quarter. At my instigation, we have worked with SCC to bring about the temporary pedestrianisation of East St in order to provide additional space for COVID-secure shopping. Though not universally-popular, the move has been well-received, as evidenced in the largest ever consultation response in council history. The closure to traffic remains in place and we continue to work with specialist advisors to maximise inclusivity for the disabled community.

We continue to work towards improvement to local cycling and walking provision with work progressing on schemes better to link Taunton to surrounding towns and villages as well as prioritising elements of the Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan.

Climate Positive Planning. We produced an interim policy statement drawing together all of the council's existing climate-based planning policy, which will enable us to focus developers' minds on how to plan developments with the climate emergency in mind. This is a temporary measure while we progress new and more comprehensive climate policies in our new local plan.