

Full Council Meeting – 5 October 2021

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

Active Travel

East St.

Active Travel PII funding has been secured for the next phase of East St. Somerset County Council reopened East St to general traffic on 24 May 2021 with the intention of alleviating traffic congestion caused by multiple planned works around Taunton. Working group sessions took place in June and July to help SWT understand the impact of any changes on multiple stakeholders. To accompany these discussions, urban designers and transportation consultants presented 'the Art of the Possible' for the future of East St with a view to producing some design schemes for East St that may be taken forward. These schemes will be taken out to public consultation in Autumn / Winter 2021

St James St.

The temporary order for the closure of St James Street is to be made permanent.

Future High Street Fund.

On 2 June 2021, SWT received the official offer letter from MHCLG confirming the award of £13,962,981 of Future High Street Funds for work in Taunton. As set out in the bid this will be used for the Coal Orchard, Firepool and Active Travel. The first payment for the financial year 2021/22 has been received and includes £750k to begin work on Taunton Town Centre Cycle and Pedestrian Improvements.

Specifically, this will include a series of improvements in St James Street, North Street and Upper High Street, in order to contribute to a cycle route from the Train Station through to Vivary Park and East Reach, overlapping with the East St specific work. Now funding has been secured the next step is to carry out a procurement exercise to engage a contractor to begin work on the scheme in the Autumn. Consultation with local cycling groups will continue as the details of the schemes is developed

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.

Taunton – Wellington

Collaborative links have been established with key stakeholder groups, including TACC, Citizens UK, Somerset County Council, Wellington Town Council and other community groups. A dedicated committee working on the route has been meeting since March 2021. SWT has committed officer time to oversee the development of

this project and the planning stage is underway. Route mapping, assessment of constraints and landowner boundaries are being actively explored; an understanding of available funding is still needed.

The route, to be formally agreed, is subject to numerous land ownership and planning issues, therefore it will likely come forward in sections.

Bishops Lydeard – Cotford St Luke – Taunton

Initial meetings of a working group between Quantock Eco and SWT have taken place, with a proposed meeting with West Somerset Railway to access the railway line at Bishops Lydeard postponed due to lockdown. Similar to the Wellington to Taunton project discussed above, SWT has dedicated officer time to undertake initial planning, mapping, constraint assessment and exploration of funding, with a project group meeting and route assessment planned for Summer 2021.

An initial route is to be identified and as above, a section by section delivery plan established to ascertain costs, opportunities and obstacle of each. Funding and application for financial support and grants from various bodies will also be key, once costs are established.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

SWT continue to work with colleagues in Somerset County Council on refining and prioritising schemes within the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan for Taunton with the intention of developing detailed project delivery proposals.

Development Management

Vacancies

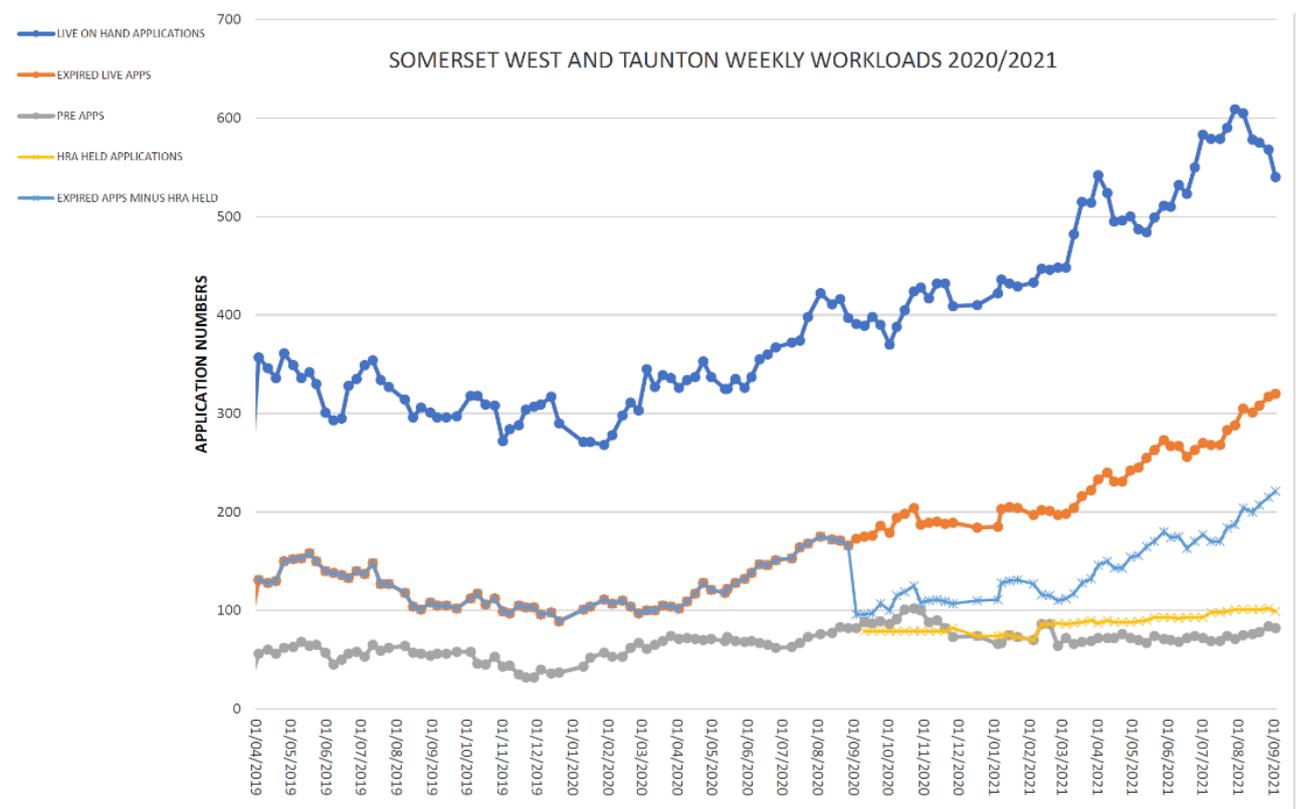
There are a number of current vacancies in development management which together with increasing workloads – see item below is putting increasing pressure on staff:

Planning Specialist – due to Alex Lawrey leaving the organisation, this post is currently vacant. The post has been advertised with a closing date of 13 September. Enforcement Officers – these posts which are currently filled by agency staff are currently being advertised. Planning Apprentice – this post has been filled and the successful applicant will start on the 27 September 2021, and will complete a Masters in Planning at the University of Plymouth.

Planning Specialist – Phosphates – a 12 month fixed term post has been created to appoint a planning officer to focus on the backlog of applications that are currently on hold due to phosphates. An advertisement is currently out for this post with a deadline of 13 September.

Performance

Workloads remain very high due to an increase in the number of applications that have been submitted, and all officers are at or above capacity. The graph below shows the number of applications on hand, the number of applications which have expired, the number of pre-application enquires and the number of applications on hold due to phosphates. This shows an increasing volume of work in the service from the beginning of 2019 onwards.



Phosphates Budget Calculator

The Phosphate Budget Calculator is complete and is available on the Councils website, it has been approved by Natural England. It is a tool that can be used by developers across Somerset to provide a standardised and transparent decision-making tool for the Local Authority and developers. It will be updated shortly.

Strategic Solution to Phosphates

The wider project is being led by policy officers in SWT on behalf of the Somerset authorities and in collaboration with other partners. Consultants were appointed in March 2021 to support the work. There are a number of elements to this project, a key one being finding deliverable solutions to the phosphate issue. Work is progressing in accordance with agreed timelines. Stakeholder engagement on potential solutions with developers, landowners and technical experts occurred during August 2021: This “Strategy” work is scheduled to be completed in Autumn 2021. This ‘Strategy’ will be agreed with Natural England and will then give us a Somerset wide framework to work within. The Council has also started the production of a Newsletter to keep people informed about the actions that SWT are taking to try to address the phosphate issue. The first edition of the Newsletter contains details of our latest letter to Ministers calling on the Government to urgently address water quality issues. It is an issue that requires immediate attention if SWT and other affected authorities are going to be able to help address the national housing crisis. A full report will go to Council on 5 October 2021 with a proposed programme of interim measures to help unlock development in the District.

Local Validation Checklist

The Local Validation Checklist has been consulted on and updated following the comments received. The final version is available on the Councils website from 1 October 2021

Planning Committee

In accordance with legal requirements, since the temporary coronavirus regulations expired on 7 May 2021, Planning Committee meetings have returned to Deane House and for the decision makers are no longer virtual meetings. Meetings can however be viewed online in real time and the Council is exploring the potential for hybrid meetings in the future. We will continue to review the meetings and make improvements where possible.

Design Guide

Public consultation on the Draft Design Guide for the District and the Public Realm Guide for the Garden Town was undertaken between 5 July 2021 until 16 August 2021. The comments received are now being considered and amended to take these into account Final versions will be brought back to Full Council for adoption as Supplementary Planning Documents at the December meeting.

Somerset Enabling Growth Project

All Councils in Somerset have signed up to the Somerset Enabling Growth Charter which is available at:

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2712/somerset-enabling-growth-charter.pdf>

Work on this project is continuing at pace. Current work streams are looking to align the conditions and S106 agreements across Somerset; consider improvements to the Somerset Ecology Service: update the Highway Authority Red Book and Standing Advice and a number of other workstreams.

Planning Policy

Recruitment

The following roles are out for recruitment to fill current vacancies and to provide additional capacity for planning policy and implementation including:

Garden Town Implementation Manager

Infrastructure Planner

Assistant Planner/Planning Graduate

Nutrient Neutrality Officer

A new Green Infrastructure Officer is due to start in early October.

SWT Local Plan 2040

In light of the timetable for the new unitary proposals, the Council has not progressed work which could be abortive or a waste of money. The focus has therefore been on evidence based studies and elements of the future preparation of the Local Plan which will also help inform a new Unitary Development Plan. The timetable and future progress of any new Unitary Plan will need to be considered as part of the transitional arrangements for the new unitary council and the structural changes order which will set out the timescale. The new Unitary Plan will also need to be considered in the context of the forthcoming Planning Bill.

The team has been focussing on the implementation of a number of placed based and other priority projects including phosphates work, Wellington Station project, Firepool, climate change and funding bids.

Current work areas

- Site assessments (~128 no.) these are considered essential to improve our evidence base for maintaining a 5-year housing land supply. This has become a more critical issue because of the impact of phosphate requirements on sites coming through the planning system. The site assessment work should support our 5-year housing land supply as well as being critical for the preparation of a new Local Plan (regardless of geographical scope following the Unitary authority decision).
- Sustainability Appraisal of sites coming through the assessment process;
- Progress Conservation Area Appraisals from SW Heritage Trust;

- Local Housing Need Assessment - Due for completion and publication September 2021.
- Economic Development Needs Assessment – Completed. Due for publication September 2021.
- Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment - commissioned jointly with Somerset Authorities. Due for completion during 2021.
- Renewable Energy Feasibility Study - Council priority project hoping to be commissioned jointly with SCC and Somerset Authorities this summer.
- Taunton Garden Town Infrastructure Delivery Plan
- Town Centres Article 4 direction

Wellington Station

The Strategic Outline Business Case is now complete was submitted to the Restoring Your Railways panel on 12 February 2021. We are now waiting on a final decision from the Department for Transport which is due to be announced over the summer. This will tell us whether it is appropriate to progress to the next stage of project development and if so, potential options for funding routes.

Tonedale Mill

The S48 Repairs notices have been served and discussions continue with the owners on their response to the notices and the emergency works required on site.

Toneworks

Following completion of the first phase of repair works, SWT have applied for further grant funding from the Government's Levelling Up Fund and Historic England to enable further targeted works that will bring Toneworks back into use for community and cultural purposes.

Sandhill Park

Sandhill Park is now in the private ownership (Blackdown Hills Living Ltd) and SWT are working with the new owners to protect the heritage asset and secure the future of the Grade II* listed building.

Wellington Monument

The National Trust have completed the works to the Grade II* Wellington Monument in and had their project launch on 3rd September 2021. It will hopefully be assessed for removal from the Heritage at Risk Register by Historic England shortly afterwards.

Firepool

Planning officers are working with the Firepool project team to agree a Planning Performance Agreement (a project management tool) between the Council as Local Planning Authority and the Council as Developer, in the interests of improving transparency and certainty and moving the project forwards. It is intended that this will lead to public consultation on a well-evidenced and justified Draft Firepool Masterplan and Design Guidance document in early 2022, and subsequent approval by the LPA as a material consideration in the assessment and determination of

relevant planning applications. The LPA and Developer teams are meeting regularly to resolve key issues and move things forward. A series of workshops with key stakeholders are currently in train to help support refinement of the Draft Masterplan which will be reported to members in due course ahead of public consultation. The Developer team has organised an all-member briefing on Firepool and Coal Orchard which LPA officers will also contribute to. It is intended that there will be some public comms arising off the back of this briefing, on the Masterplan and links across to anticipated planning applications.