

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Executive - 17 November 2021

Innovation District Report

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Marcus Kravis

Report Author: Lisa Tuck, Service Manager – Economic Development, Growth, and Inclusion

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

1.1. This paper brings forward a recommendation from the Corporate Scrutiny Committee (3rd November 2021) to recommend to the Executive that;

1.1.1. A feasibility study is undertaken for the provision of an innovation hub based in Taunton and that the Council brings the results of such a study back through the democratic path when completed.

1.1.2. The funding for this proposal is to be found within existing 2021/22 budgets where possible.

1.2. This report provides additional information relating to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee recommendation and proposes that the work already identified following the Education and Innovation Business Consultancy (EiBC) 'Developing the Innovation Ecosystem in Somerset West and Taunton – Framework for action' report is progressed.

2. Recommendations

2.1. That the Executive resolve to progress the work identified in the 'Developing the Innovation Ecosystem in Somerset West and Taunton – Framework for Action' report and not to carry out an additional feasibility study for an innovation hub in Taunton.

3. Risk Assessment

3.1. Additional funding to complete a feasibility study on an Innovation Hub based in Taunton is likely to significantly duplicate work of the recent feasibility study carried out by consultants on the potential for an innovation park or campus within the district.

3.2. The procurement of an additional feasibility study will inhibit the progress of the delivery of the Innovation District action plan and route map designed to provide short-, medium-, and long-term benefits for the district through the attraction of inward investment and economic growth.

3.3. There is a risk that the collective ongoing place shaping activity with business leaders, university centre, college, clusters and innovation leadership group will cease

until such a time it becomes a priority for the unitary council. This will impact on the reputation of the Council.

- 3.4. There is a risk that the momentum gained will be lost during an additional feasibility study and SWT will not be sufficiently prepared for upcoming Levelling up and Prosperity funding bids.

4. Background

- 4.1. In November 2018, the Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) Scrutiny Committee presented a paper to the TDBC Executive Committee from the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group 'Review into Affordable Employment Land' with the following recommendation:

- 4.1.1 Investigate the feasibility of an office for the creation of a Research and Innovation Centre: TDBC, and the subsequent Council, should undertake a prompt detailed feasibility study into the viability of such a centre. This needs to be enabled by appropriate TDBC resources, including officers, elected members and a dedicated office if appropriate. Effective use of appropriate partnership working is crucial to the success.

- 4.2. On 28th November 2018, the TDBC Executive noted the Task and Finish Groups Report and resolved the following:

- 4.2.1 Investigate the feasibility of an office for the creation of a Research and Innovation Centre:

- a) TDBC and the subsequent Council should undertake a prompt detailed feasibility study into the viability of such a centre.
- b) Effective use of appropriate partnership working was crucial to the success of such a venture.

- 4.3. An informal working group of Members and officers was established to take forward this action.

- 4.4. A scope of work was created as part of a suite of tender documents published during the procurement of a consultant (or consultants) to carry out the feasibility study (attached at Appendix A).

- 4.5. During scoping of the works in May 2020 the Portfolio Holder for Assets and Economic Development agreed to extend the scope of works from a single option feasibility study which **“assessed the extent of the market opportunity for developing an innovation park in Taunton”** to a multi option feasibility study **“A report which assesses and validates and/or develops and refines an initial concept or proposes an alternative concept for the development of an innovation/technology park and /or science park in our District”**.

- 4.6. The reasoning behind the decision to extend the scope of the contract is as follows:

- 4.6.1 From April 2019 the new Somerset West and Taunton Councils had responsibility for Economic Development and Growth across a wider geographical area including the former West Somerset area and that the

feasibility study should consider the opportunities, community benefits and land availability across the district.

- 4.6.2 The approach to widen the scope would reduce the risk, if a single option were found to be unfeasible, that the feasibility study would result in no other option to take forward.
- 4.6.3 The approach would ensure that the contract would produce a deliverable plan that could be taken forward at the end of the feasibility study which would produce immediate, medium-, and long-term positive impacts on the local economy.
- 4.6.4 The approach would ensure that the independent, experienced, and professional advice of consultants – considering a rapidly changing innovation environment, nationally tried and tested models, local, county, and national progress, and employment land availability across the district would provide a current and realistic option for the Council to take forward.
- 4.7. The contract was awarded to Education and Innovation Business Consultancy (EiBC) in July 2020.
- 4.8. In December 2020 EiBC produced a report that included the findings of the feasibility study (Appendix B – redacted in line with data protection regulations) and a summary report provided to Members and published on the SWT website.
- 4.9. Further information can be found in the report to Scrutiny, Innovation District Update, 3rd November 2021 (Appendix C).

5. Consideration of the recommendation to carry out a feasibility study for an Innovation Hub in Taunton.

- 5.1. The results of the feasibility study completed by EiBC in November 2020 established that at this time there is no requirement for an Innovation campus or park in Taunton or within the district.
- 5.2. The recommendations within the EiBC feasibility study are aligned with ambition of the HoSW LEP to establish ‘technopole,’ ‘eco-systems’ and ‘networks’ across the region – linking already established hubs, businesses and organisations together.
- 5.3. The Digital Innovation Centre on Firepool is due to be occupied and operational in early 2023 acting as a hub in Taunton for Innovation. It should also be borne in mind that the Nexus site adjacent to the M5 has planning permission for employment use and provides space for a potential hub. This can be progressed without a further study.
- 5.4. In addition, commissioning is in progress of an overarching and shared support service for following Innovation Hubs in Somerset:
 - Somerset Energy Innovation Centre (Bridgwater)
 - Yeovil Innovation Centre
 - Taunton Digital Innovation Centre
- 5.5. The feasibility study completed by EiBC has considered the Innovation Hubs already established or in progress, including the Rutherford Diagnostics and Innovation Centre

and the private sector led Collar Factory innovation and collaboration space (opening spring 2022) in Taunton and focuses SWTs delivery on establishing a strong business and investor led 'eco-system' that would enable the attraction of inward investment, collaborative research and development and local growth across the district.

6. Links to Corporate Strategy

- 6.1. Our Environment and Economy: "Encourage wealth creation and economic growth throughout the District by *attracting inward investment, enabling research and innovation, improving the skills of the local workforce* and seeking to *ensure the provision of adequate and affordable employment land* to meet different business needs."
- 6.2. SWT's Economic Development Strategy approved at Full Council in February 2020.

Encourage wealth creation and clean economic growth throughout the District by:

- Attracting inward investment and enabling research and innovation.
- Explore a Higher-Level Educational Research Institution and Innovation Park to explore and validate emerging knowledge economy opportunities such as AI/Big Data and digital technologies, remote healthcare delivery and low carbon renewable energy and environmental technologies as well as exploring the circular economy and natural capital, including plastic waste recycling.
- Reviewing business and innovation support to determine the most appropriate approach to building a sustainable Somerset wide local business and innovation ecosystem.
- Strategic employment site development, specifically referencing Firepool and the development of an innovation zone.
- Implementing a Rural Local Development Order, supporting and promoting Nexus 25 and our own commercial assets and sites.
- Taunton Garden Town becoming a dynamic economy of cultural, creative, and digital businesses as part of a future Tech Nation Corridor.

7. Finance / Resource Implications

- 7.1. The financial implications of the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee are being considered by the Director of Development and Place and Finance officers. A verbal update on the financial implications of the recommendation will be presented verbally at the meeting of the Executive on 17th November 2020.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1. Any new feasibility study would be subject to procurement and contract legislation. There are no other legal implications of note.

9. Climate and Sustainability Implications

- 9.1. The recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee has not been assessed for Climate or Sustainability Implications.

10. Safeguarding and/or Community Safety Implications

- 10.1. The recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee will not have safeguarding or community implications.

11. Equality and Diversity Implications

11.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee Equality and Diversity considerations should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

12. Social Value Implications

12.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee Social Value considerations should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

13. Partnership Implications

13.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee Partnership considerations should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

14. Health and Wellbeing Implications

14.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee Health and Safety considerations should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

15. Asset Management Implications.

15.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee Health and Safety considerations should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

16. Data Protection Implications

16.1. The full findings of the feasibility study carried out by EIBC and attached at Appendix B have been redacted to comply with GDPR regulations, protect the identity of external contributors, and remove any commercially sensitive information.

17. Consultation Implications

17.1. If the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee is resolved by the Executive Committee consultation with key stakeholders, businesses, partner agencies, education providers and regional partners should be included in the scope included in the procurement process.

18. Corporate Scrutiny Comments

18.1 It would be normal for reports moving through committees to Executive to contain a section on Scrutiny comments, in this case the report was not originally intended to contain a decision and progress onward through the committee process. Therefore, the whole report should be considered to reflect the response and supported recommendation from Corporate Scrutiny where considerable debate took place.

Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny - Yes**
- **Cabinet/Executive - Yes**
- **Full Council - No**

Reporting Frequency: Once only

Contact Officers

Name	Lisa Tuck (was Redston), Economic Development Operational Manager
Email	l.tuck@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk