



CONSULTATION STATEMENT

Somerset West and Taunton Council: District Wide Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012

Introduction

Somerset West and Taunton Council (the Council) has produced a Districtwide Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which seeks a step change in the quality of new development in the district and provides additional guidance on how relevant policies of the adopted development plan should be responded to in relation to securing high quality design. A draft Design Guide SPD was considered by the Council's Executive meeting on 28 January 2020 and approved for public consultation. Following consultation in spring 2020, winter 2020/21 on an expanded 'Streets, Parking and Placemaking' section and in summer 2021, the Council has made several amendments across the document in response to comments received. The Council has now finalised the document in anticipation of adoption as an SPD.

This Consultation Report explains how the Council has undertaken public consultation to inform the development of the SPD, and how the engagement, feedback and responses received have influenced its development. The report covers: Which bodies and persons were invited to make comments; How those bodies and persons were invited to make comment; The material that was subject to consultation; A summary of the responses received; and A summary of how the responses influenced the development of the SPD.

The Council has an adopted Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The SCI outlines that the Council is committed to effective community engagement and seeks to use a wide range of methods for involving the community in the plan making process. SWT's Statement of Community Involvement was adopted in November 2019. In relation to plan preparation, the SCI relates to the preparation of Development Plan Documents (DPDs), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA), Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and Neighbourhood Plans. As such, the SPD is required to comply with the SCI.

The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 set out what is required in terms of public participation and the making of representations in relation to the production of SPDs. In response to Regulation 12(b), a Draft Consultation Statement was made available for public consultation alongside the SPD itself in the final round of consultation. This final Statement complies with the requirements of Regulation 12(a).

Consultation Summary

The Districtwide Design Guide SPD has been subject to three separate periods of consultation:

- Spring 2020 (3 February 2020 to 30 March 2020) – First draft Design Guide
- Winter 2020/21 (11 December 2020 to 5 February 2021) – Expanded 'Streets, Parking and Placemaking' section
- Summer 2021 (5 July 2021 to 16 August 2021) – Updated Draft Design Guide

Summer 2021 Consultation

Consultation on an updated Districtwide Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) took place from 05 July 2021 until Monday 16 August 2021 (six weeks). In accordance with Regulation 12(b)(i) of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012, consultation responses had to be submitted within this time period in order to be taken into consideration.

The documents available as part of this consultation included the following:

- Updated Draft Districtwide Design Guide SPD;
- Draft Strategic Environmental Assessment / Habitat Regulations Assessment (SEA/HRA) Screening Report; and
- Draft Consultation Statement

Purpose of the Consultation

The Updated Draft Districtwide Design Guide SPD was produced as a response to a number of the issues raised in the previous rounds of consultation, particularly in relation to the climate emergency and how this is integral to high quality design.

As such, the purpose of the consultation was four-fold:

- To seek views of stakeholders and raise awareness in relation to the proposed amended design guidance,
- To ensure that the final SPD has been informed by a demonstrable level of public engagement and input as expected by the Planning Practice Guidance
- To ensure legal compliance with relevant Regulations and to ensure statutory consultee consultation in relation to the Draft SEA/HRA Screening; and
- To provide notice to the development industry, of the Council's design guidance and that as SPD it will influence planning decisions where it is a material consideration.

Who We Consulted

A list of Specific Consultation Bodies, General Consultation Bodies, and other organisations and groups the Council seeks to involve in plan-making is included in the SCI. As a non-statutory plan, there is no statutory list of bodies and organisations that the Council was required to consult in preparation of the SPD. However, in accordance with Regulation 13(1) of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning)(England) Regulations 2012, any person may make representations about an SPD. As such, all those on this list were consulted at this stage.

The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA

Regulations) and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (Habitat Regulations) set out that Historic England, the Environment Agency and Natural England are statutory consultees in relation to the Draft SEA/HRA Screening Report and as such these bodies were specifically invited to respond to this element.

The Council is committed to ensuring that local groups, organisations, and individuals are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the preparation of planning policy documents.

The Council has a database of consultees, who have either commented upon, or expressed an interest in being involved with the development of local plans. This database is used to keep individuals, companies and organisations informed on the production of the Local Plan and other planning policy documents. New consultees are added to the consultation database via e-mail or letter to the Strategy Team requesting inclusion on to the database. The General Data Protection Regulations are followed to ensure that personal data is only required and retained where proportionate and necessary, is only gathered where explicit consent has been provided, is kept securely and is not disclosed to others. All bodies and persons identified within this database were emailed with notification of the consultation.

How We Consulted

Consultation on the updated Draft Districtwide Design Guide SPD ran from 05 July 2021 until Monday 16 August 2021 (six weeks). During this time a variety of methods were employed, though the full range of methods was limited by definitive restrictions and a cautiously proportionate approach due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and gradual loosening of lockdown restrictions.

Responses to the consultation were invited:

- Online via the Council's consultation portal at <https://yoursay.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/design-guide/districtwide-design-guide03/>
- By email: strategy@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk
- By writing to the Council at: Placemaking Specialist, Planning and Development, Somerset West and Taunton Council, Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, TA1 1HE;

To publicise the consultation, the Council:

- Emailed notification of the consultation to all bodies and persons identified within the consultation database.
- Made the above consultation documents available for inspection at the Council's principal offices at:
 - Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, TA1 1HE (Monday – Friday, 8.30am to 5pm)
 - West Somerset House, Killick Way, Williton, TA4 4QA (Monday – Friday, 8.30am to 5pm)
- Published the documents on the Council's website at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning-policy/districtwide-design-guide-spd/>
- Published a press release via the Council's website and social media posts via Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn in order to raise interest and encourage

participation, at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/news/swt-announces-further-design-guide-consultations/>

- Presented to a virtual meeting of the Agents Forum – 12 July 2021
- Presented to a virtual meeting of the Taunton Design Circle – 28 July 2021
- Presented to a virtual meeting of the Somerset Affordable Housing Group – 22 July 2021
- Hosted a virtual Town and Parish Councils Event – 13 July 2021
- Held a virtual General Question & Answer Session for Members of the Public – 14 July 2021 between 12.30 – 4.30pm

In light of the covid restrictions, it was decided not to arrange any in-person consultation events as would normally take place.

The consultation documents could also be viewed online at all libraries in Somerset West and Taunton.

Level of Response

Overall, there were 31 responses to the consultation. Of the 31 respondents, 28 submitted their representation by email, 1 by post and the remaining 12 respondents responded online.

Summary of Responses Received

The results of the consultation were representative of a wide spectrum of respondents, including Members, statutory consultees, community groups, parish and town councils, developers, housing associations and internal staff. In total 31 responses were received.

There was an overwhelming positive response to the revised draft design guide, with comments such as 'Overall, I was much impressed by the draft. It is refreshing to see a well thought out and logical document', 'Commends the draft Design Guide for being ambitious in scope and clearly communicating best practice for the design process, 'Strongly supports and welcomes the production of the Design Guide SPD and supports the Forward by Cllr Rigby as 'entirely laudable objectives which would assist in delivering good design outcomes' and 'Welcomes the preparation of the Guide as it is timely given the new NPPF etc. They commend its comprehensiveness and the design process and that it is clearly laid out, attractive to look at with many useful illustrations and signposts to useful information'.

The responses covered a wide variety of points, which is to be expected given the range of respondents' interests. The comments relating to the volume house builders are treated separately as their range, emphasis and depth was more substantial. Responses received from other parties can be broadly summarised under the following headings – a) Local Distinctiveness; b) Zero Carbon and Sustainable Development; c) Street Trees and EV Charging; d) Public Art; and e) Taller Buildings.

- a) Local Distinctiveness – The coverage by the design guide of the need to respond to local distinctiveness was welcomed by the majority of respondents, but it was recognised that this could also be achieved by contemporary design. – In response it has been emphasised that contemporary solutions that respond to local distinctiveness are welcomed. The recent update of the NPPF which requires that buildings are designed beautifully has been also been addressed.
- b) Zero Carbon and Sustainable Development – A number of respondents were keen

that the zero carbon agenda is afforded the highest consideration given the climate emergency. – In response the existing topic (5.2) has been expanded and emphasis is given in the introduction and in guidance on flood resilience.

- c) Street Trees and EV Charging – A number of respondents were keen to ensure that electric vehicle charging provision was catered in an appropriate manner related to context. Many respondents wanted to be assured that street trees would be included in new developments. – In response both EV charging and street trees were the subject of detailed discussions with SCC Highways to agree adoption and detailed design matters.
- d) Public Art – A member raised the issue of a lack of guidance regarding public art. – In response this has been addressed in the creation of a new design topic on public art (5.17)
- e) Taller Buildings – There were a few respondents who raised points regarding the need for increased guidance on the impact of taller buildings both on the landscape and townscape of main settlements in the district. – In response the guidance has been amended and strengthened on this matter and replacement diagrams provided.

Of the 31 respondents to the third consultation, 8 received were from volume house builders. A number of the comments from the volume house builders were broadly similar to those expressed in the previous consultations, particularly on issues of the level of prescription and local distinctiveness. These comments can broadly be summarised under the following headings – a) Over Prescriptive, Stifling Innovation and Document Too Lengthy; b) Local Distinctiveness; c) Requirements of SCC Highways and EV Charging; d) Zero Carbon and Future Homes Standards; and d) Design Review.

- a) Over Prescriptive, Stifling Innovation and Document Too Lengthy – Some of the house builders considered that the draft Design Guide was too prescriptive, would stifle innovative contemporary design and that the document was too lengthy. The issue of prescription was raised in the previous consultations. – In response, it was considered important for the design guide to strike a balance between policy requirements and to demonstrate through examples how these could be achieved in practise. The diagrams were considered illustrative, and the guidance made clear that if an applicant can demonstrate that other solutions would achieve the stated requirements, then other such solutions may be considered a valid approach.
- b) Local Distinctiveness – this was mentioned by a minority of the developers as being an issue and was also raised in the previous consultations. The house builder's concerns related to interwar suburban development not being recognised within the design guide as locally distinctive, that the distinctiveness of Taunton's vernacular was not sufficiently defined and that the section on distinctiveness over emphasises traditional built forms. – In response, interwar suburban development is universal throughout the whole country due to the standardisation of house types, layouts, road standards and density. These factors have resulted in uniform 'anywhere' character which is often at odds with the townscape and landscape of existing traditional settlements within the district. Furthermore, there is a need to make settlements walkable and to raise densities in areas which are most sustainable and nearest to facilities; this means that suburban low-density development is far less applicable than two generations ago. In regard to Taunton's vernacular not being sufficiently defined, much of

Taunton built form is 19 Century development with many characteristics that are common with building forms in other towns. There is however a palette of materials and a limited number of building details which are common to Taunton. On this point the house builders did not appear to appreciate that the guidance sets out pointers for applicants to make their own character appraisal of their site and its context. Regarding traditional building forms, the guidance does not suggest that an applicant slavishly copies historic buildings found in the district. The Design Guide advocates that traditional buildings provide a sense of place and identity, through establishing a scale, form, layout, and palette of materials which should be recognised and used as a springboard for design interpretation in new development.

- c) Relationship with SCC Highways Guidance – A number of the house builders raised the issue of the relationship of the Highway Authority and those of Planning and Placemaking. – In response, a series of workshop meetings were held with SCC Highways to attempt to resolve differing approaches to streetmaking. Substantial progress was made as shown in section 4.4.
- d) Working Towards Zero Carbon Design and Construction – Several of the house builders raised the question of the degree to which the guidance on Towards Zero Carbon Construction (section 5.2) was mandatory. In addition, some house builders raised the question of the design guide's relationship to the Future Homes Standard. – In response, the design topic 'Towards Zero Carbon Design and Construction' sets out a design process to help move development towards delivering zero carbon buildings. Tackling carbon emissions and climate impact via such a design process is integral to good design and aligns with existing planning policies. The topic clearly differentiates between what is policy requirement and what is aspirational/illustrative as the document does throughout. Additional text was prepared to clarify the relationship with the Government's proposed interim update to Building Regulations Part L (due December 2021) and the Future Homes Standard (due 2025). However, it was considered reasonable to illustrate how new development could and should be looking to push ambition in this regard in advance of and beyond these standards in order to deliver on the adopted target of working towards carbon neutrality by 2030. In response to the house builder's concerns at how to mitigate the effects of overheating in residential buildings, an additional illustrative diagram was provided in the design guide.
- e) Design Review – Several of the house builders expressed concern at the status and need for Design Review (to be renamed Quality Review) – In response, Design Review Panels are a well-established feature of the planning process, and their use is advocated in the NPPF and Policy D7 of the Taunton Deane Site Allocations and Development Management Plan. The design guide advocates that they offer independent critical friend advice. The criteria for triggering the need for design review related to the significance of a proposal as well as its size. The number of likely applications received per year, triggering the need for design review, was considered small in comparison to the total number of applications received.

You Said, We Did

As a result of the 31 responses received during the third consultation, the following substantial revisions and additions were carried out to the document:

- The Design Guide was updated to take account of the new NPPF guidance on achieving 'Beauty' in new development as well as high quality and sustainability. Section 6.5 – Quality Review has been amended to clearly set out the Local Planning Authority's criteria for schemes where Design Review will be strongly encouraged as part of the authority's consideration of a development proposal. A bespoke Quality Review Panel has been set up for SWT district area and it is hoped that this will assist in making judgements on whether a scheme achieves high quality, beauty, and sustainability.
- Throughout the Design Guide, references and photographs were expanded on to encourage the use of contemporary design solutions as well as traditional. The Design Guide emphasises that the guidance should be treated as a springboard for good design rather than a straitjacket for development.
- Design guidance for flood resilience was expanded on in relation to the need for sustainable urban drainage, this was particularly in relation to guidance from the Construction Industry Research and Information Association. This publication has also been included in the References section.
- A new Design Topic on Public Art was included in the guidance. This subject was considered too light touch in the previous consultation drafts. This guidance corresponds to that contained in the Public Realm Design Guide for Taunton Garden Town. It emphasises that public art should not just be thought of as individual pieces of art but should also be integral to building design. It also emphasises the importance of achieving beauty in the built environment.
- The design guidance for achieving the urban block in a layout was also expanded upon to reflect the density requirements and variations shown in the National Model Design Code.

Other Minor Changes included:

- The context and local distinctiveness of the architectural character of Taunton was expanded upon to better reflect the predominant vernacular house types in the settlement.
- The guidance for shopfronts was expanded to include more guidance for signage and advertisements.
- Guidance on Taller Buildings was expanded upon particularly to include SWT's requirements for assessing such proposals and to include latest reference to Historic England guidance.
- Greater guidance was provided for agricultural buildings with their landscape setting, particularly regarding topography and the land profile of a site.
- The section on house types was amended and clarified to show the range and type of house types which are necessary as components to make successful streets and places.
- Greater reference was made to security and safety within layouts and the need to consult the Police Crime Prevention Officer.
- Guidance was also expanded on for the preparation of Heritage Statements in accordance with comments from Historic England.

Previous Consultations

The Design Guide was initially subject to consultation from 3 February to 30 March 2020. Due to the covid pandemic, several consultations were significantly delayed including Somerset County Council (SCC). Following an objection from SCC Highways, detailed discussions took place in a series of workshop sessions between Somerset West and

Taunton and SCC as the Highway Authority.

As a result, on discussions with the Highway Authority, a second formal consultation was carried out on the Design Guide from 11 December to 5 February 2021 on an expanded section in the Design Guide 'Streets, Parking and Placemaking'.

During both previous consultations a number of methods were employed - the Council's consultation portal survey, by email and by post. All organisations, groups and individuals on the Council's Local Plan data base were notified of the consultation by the Strategy Team. In addition, press releases were issued by the Council's Communication Team and the consultations promoted on social media. The Design Guide was available on the Council's website and a copy was also available for inspection at the Council's office at Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton.

In addition, presentations on the Design Guide were carried out on 12 February 2020 at a CPD event for built environment professionals in Taunton, and for housing enabling providers on 27 February 2020. Also, a presentation on the Design Guide was also given to the Council's Agents Panel on 11 December 2020.

Most of the consultees welcomed the Design Guide SPD and were impressed with its attractive layout, illustrative material and its ambition to improve the standard of design. It was particularly welcomed as some consultees considered that the standard of design in the district was generally mediocre and lack local distinctiveness.

Of the 36 respondents to the first consultation and 7 respondents to the second consultation, 4 were from volume house builders already developing major sites in Taunton. The detailed comments from the volume house builders (which often overlap) and SWT's responses to them are show in detail in the summary of consultations in Appendix 1. These can broadly be summarised under the following headings - a) Viability; b) Level of Prescription; c) Local Distinctiveness; and d) Relationship with SCC Highways and parking.

Others comments received from residents, parish councils, amenity bodies etc, can broadly be summarised under the following headings - a) Importance of local distinctiveness; b) Need for active travel and well connected places; c) Need for new development to be as low carbon as possible and d) support for the Design Process.

In addition to comments from external respondents, other specialist officers from the Council provided consultation comments. Representations requested greater emphasis on a) zero carbon in the form of an extra topic, b) the development of smaller sites in order to expand the existing guidance in this area to smaller scale developments, c) agricultural buildings to reflect the rural character of the district.

A number of changes were made following the first and second rounds of consultation, responding to issues raised. Some of these changes were substantial revisions and additions, whilst others were of a smaller nature. For these reasons, the Council published an updated draft for a third round of public consultation before preparing the final draft SPD for adoption.