

Full Council Meeting – 7 December 2021

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

Quality Review Panel

As set out in the Districtwide Design Guide SPD due to be adopted at Full Council on 7 December 2021 the Council has established a Quality Review Panel to be externally managed. The Panel has been established to support the achievement of high quality, innovative and sustainable placemaking.

Applicants are encouraged to make use of the panel at an early stage in the design process to identify and test the proposed design's key objectives and assumptions. The Council will generally expect schemes of more than 50 homes or 5,000 sq metres of commercial/other floorspace to be informed by review. Other smaller complex schemes may also be appropriate for review.

The panel's advice to the applicants and to the Local Planning Authority will support sound planning decisions in respect of design quality and the advice provided will be a material planning consideration in the determination of planning applications. It is intended to assist Council officers and applicants to achieve design improvements and support planning committee decisions, where design quality is a key consideration.

The Quality Review Panel provides independent, objective, expert advice on development proposals. Generally, schemes benefit most if they are referred to the panel at an early stage to identify and consider the key assumptions of the proposed design as the advice given by the panel is likely to be most effective when given before a scheme becomes too fixed. Early engagement with the Quality Review Panel should reduce the risk of delay at application stage by ensuring that designs reach an acceptable standard. The panel brings together leading professionals with a broad range of expertise so that its remit is much wider than pure 'design'. More details can be found at

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning/quality-review-panel/>

A358 Taunton to Southfields dualling scheme National Highways Consultation

The Council has submitted its formal response to the recent 6 week public consultation exercise (deadline for comments was 22 November 2021) undertaken by National Highways on their proposal to improve and dual the A358 between the Southfields Roundabout in Ilminster and junction 25 of the M5 motorway.

The Council continues to support improvements to the A358 between Taunton and Southfields. The Council's existing statutory planning policy, Taunton Deane Core Strategy Policy SP2 (Realising the Vision for Taunton), supports the provision of: "...a Henlade Bypass, traffic calming and improved junctions as part of A303/A358 improvement package..." as part of the infrastructure provision which would help the town to realise its potential.

It is recognised that the economic benefit for the wider south west peninsula remains well established and the Council continues to welcome the fact that National Highways is bringing forward plans for improvements following Government's announcements in 2014. The improvement of the A358 should provide important improvements to the accessibility of Taunton as a high quality multifunctional sub-regional service centre and thereby further enhance its attractiveness and success.

It is the Council's view that the scheme does not adequately demonstrate how it is responding to the climate emergency and the Climate Change Act and further consideration should be given to opportunities to reduce, mitigate and offset emissions; as well as deliver a fast and direct strategic cycle route.

The public consultation documents are not the final version. The plans and the detail are likely to be altered in the light of public comment and there will be a public inquiry into the proposals later next year.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

The Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) has now been published on the Somerset County Council website. It is intended to be regularly updated. SWT continue to work with colleagues in Somerset County Council on refining and prioritising schemes within the LCWIP with the intention of developing detailed project delivery proposals. Work is now beginning to scope out how the garden communities will link into the strategic routes prioritised in the LCWIP and how other missing links can be delivered.

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. As previously advised, consultants were appointed in March 2021 to support the work there are a number of elements to this project.

The complexities of water movement on the Levels have led to delays on producing a definitive map. It affects land north east of Bridgwater and land around Glastonbury (i.e. land beyond SWT). The consultants are awaiting a response from the Internal Drainage Board before sending the final boundary to Natural England for sign off. Along with addressing a number of other matters raised during the stakeholder briefing events in August, this has caused delay in the production of the strategy document. This work is expected to be completed by January 2022.

In the meantime, as Members are aware, on 5 October 2021, Full Council approved a [Phosphorus Mitigation Programme of Interim Measures](#) which includes: a £2million budget for the creation of phosphate credits on a financially recoverable basis. This interim programme aims to unlock between 700 to 1,350 homes in the River Tone Catchment area and a planning phosphates sub-committee is presently being set up to manage this programme. The Council sought to recruit a phosphates planner and nutrient neutrality officer but was unsuccessful. Additional resource and expertise has therefore been seconded into the team from Arup to assist with moving forward the work programme.

Neighbourhood Planning

West Monkton & Cheddon Fitzpaine (WM&CF) parishes have submitted a revised Neighbourhood Plan to the Council. This has been published for consultation from 5 November until 17 December 2021 and is an update to their current Neighbourhood Plan. The Plan is scheduled to go to examination in early 2022 and revises a

number of policies in the Plan with the aim of: increasing the climate and ecological robustness, conforming with Taunton Garden Town Vision, supporting the Declarations of Climate and Ecological Emergency, and updating Local Green Space designations.

Planning Policy Updates

Recruitment

The following roles have been filled to provide additional capacity for planning policy and implementation including:

Garden Town Implementation Manager - Jenny Clifford

Green Infrastructure Officer – Omri Ben-Chetrit

Infrastructure Planner - James Holbrook

Planning Policy Officer - Sophie Jones

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. The team has also been reviewing where each of the Somerset district councils are in terms of their existing and in-progress evidence base.

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).
- Progress Conservation Area Appraisals from SW Heritage Trust.
- Local Housing Need Assessment – Completed. Published October 2021.
- Economic Development Needs Assessment – Completed. Published October 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.

Town Centres health check

To provide evidence for Plan making, we will be going out to tender during November 2021 for consultants to produce:

A report on Town Centre Health Checks, Retail Area Boundary Reviews and consideration as to whether an Article 4 Direction should be made. This commission will comprise:

- Town Centre Health Checks for Taunton, Wellington, Minehead, Williton and Watchet
- Retail Area Boundary Reviews for the town centres of Taunton, Wellington, Minehead, Williton and Watchet
- A Recommendation Report on whether an Article 4 Direction to remove permitted development rights regarding the change of use from class E use (commercial, business and service uses) to C3 use (dwelling houses) should be made by the Council for any or parts of Taunton, Wellington, Minehead, Williton and Watchet town centres and define its extent

Should the Council decide following the report to make an Article 4 Direction (s) for any of the town centres, the consultants would lead on the public consultation process.

Taunton Garden Town Infrastructure Delivery Plan

Following procurement Ove Arup and partners were commissioned in October 2021 to produce three outputs:

1. The Production of an Infrastructure Delivery Plan for Taunton Garden Town - The IDP will explain how the Council will deliver on its strategic ambitions. It will set out the necessary governance, partners, funding, and a programme of projects and initiatives to implement the ideas set out within the Garden Town Vision. It will also establish the mechanisms by which the progress and success of the Garden Town can be measured. It will be designed as a living document.
2. The Production of a Stewardship Report - The report is to advise on options for the ongoing long-term management and maintenance of community facilities and open space within Taunton Garden Town.
3. The delivery of an Online Infrastructure Engagement Platform - The online infrastructure engagement platform is seeking to provide up-to-date information about strategies, projects and activities and allow the public to identify, suggest and comment upon new infrastructure.

Completion is anticipated for March 2022.

Wellington Station

The Government's autumn budget sets out £5 million of funding to develop new railway stations at Wellington and Cullompton. This funding will enable the project to advance to the next stage of development and follows the submission of a business case to the Department for Transport earlier in the year.

The funding announcement is preceded by months of hard work, research and partnership building to develop the case for the proposed new train stations at Wellington and Cullompton by the Steering Group and WSP Consulting.

Firepool

The Planning Performance Agreement for Firepool has now been signed 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 spring 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. Planning applications for Block 3, levels and drainage across the site, and for the Trenchard Way access have now been validated and planning officers are considering them.

5 Year Housing Land Supply (5YHLS)

On 23 November 2021 SWT will publish an addendum to the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) stating the former West Somerset Council area has a 10.1 years of housing land supply.

On 23 November 2021 the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032 (WSC LP) will be five years old. From this date the Council can use the Governments Standard Method (SM) for calculating the housing requirement instead of the housing figures in WSC LP. Under the SM, which is calculated annually, the local housing requirement will be 99dw per annum (94dw + 5% buffer) as opposed to 199dw per annum (155dw WSCLP + previous years shortfall + 5% buffer). The buffer figure is set by the Housing Delivery Test Measurement (HDT) published in February; in 2021 it was a "pass" at 107% so a 5% buffer is added. Information on the large sites (10+ dwellings) that SWT consider to be deliverable and developable has been updated for the addendum. The total supply of deliverable plots is 1,000 over 5 years providing 10.1 years housing land supply.

These figures will be recalculated in March 2022. It is proposed to keep the calculations separate for the two former authorities. We currently estimate that the former West Somerset area will have in excess of 5 years, but the former Taunton Deane area may drop below 5 years. A factor will be the Housing Delivery Test (HDT) figures due to be published by DLUHC in February 2022. A HDT Measurement above 85% is a 5% buffer on the local housing need figure; below 85% is a 20% buffer and below 75% is presumption in favour of sustainable development. The past three years have seen a significant decline in delivery of sites across SWT primarily as a result of the phosphates issue and there is therefore a risk that the next HDT Measurement will be below the 75% threshold.

Net Zero Carbon Toolkit

Work has begun on adapting a Net Zero Carbon Toolkit originally published by Cotswold, West Oxfordshire and Forest of Deane Councils for use as an SWT document. The Toolkit is intended to help communicate what is entailed in both delivering new net zero compliant buildings and retrofitting existing buildings in striving towards Net Zero and make knowledge on these issues more accessible. It is aspirational and a guidance and communication tool, rather than a policy position. The new build element aligns well with and would neatly complement the aspirational standards included in the Districtwide Design Guide SPD due to be adopted by Full Council on 7 December 2021. Retrofit is an area where we have far less influence

(beyond our own stock). The Toolkit could help us in responding to community retrofit and communication actions in the CNCR Action Plan. It is intended that the Toolkit will be ready for publishing in early 2022 alongside potential updates to Climate Positive Planning.

Development Management Update

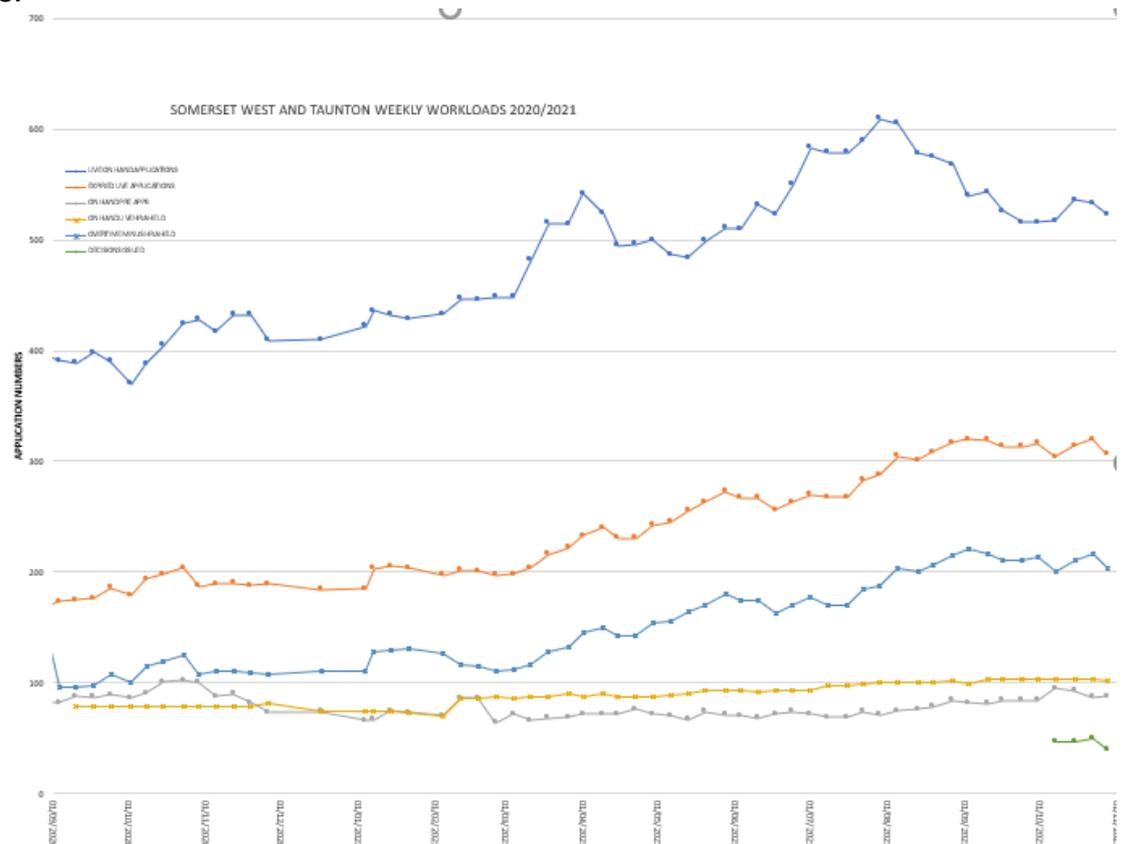
Recruitment

The Planning Specialist vacant post has been filled and a new officer will join the team in January 2022. However, another Planning Specialist has recently handed their notice in and their role is currently being advertised.

Planning Enforcement Officers have been appointed and both will be in post by mid December 2021. There will be a short handover period from the current contractors before they leave to ensure that the new officers are fully briefed on existing cases. A Phosphate Planning Specialist and a Nutrient Neutrality Officer have joined the team on secondment.

Performance

Workloads remain high due to the change in officers and increased amount of applications being submitted. An agency planning officer will be recruited to help reduce backlogs.



The graph above provides an overview of applications and pre-apps on hand.