

Full Council Meeting – 8 February 2022

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

A358 Taunton to Southfields dualling scheme National Highways Consultation

The public consultation exercise for the proposal to improve and dual the A358 between the Southfields Roundabout in Ilminster and junction 25 of the M5 motorway, ended on 22 November 2021. The Council submitted its response as part of this process. This response highlighted in particular that the draft scheme does not adequately demonstrate how it is responding to the climate emergency and the Climate Change Act and recommended that further consideration should be given to opportunities to reduce, mitigate and offset emissions. We also highlighted the need to deliver a fast and direct strategic cycle route.

National Highways is now processing and analysing the feedback from their consultation exercise and will consider re-designing and/or amending the proposals accordingly. During this period, National Highways will hold many stakeholder and interest group sessions in order to continue to inform the design process. This will include, but not exclusively:

- The Community Liaison Forum;
- The Communications Working Group;
- The Technical Working Group; and
- The Business Liaison Forum.

Officers of this Council are involved in all of the relevant forum and groups and will continue to influence the design of the proposal in the best interests of our communities and the wider Council ambitions in general. The next meeting of the Community Liaison Forum, is due to in February. It is intended that this meeting will include the latest project updates and news, with a focus on sharing an overview of views expressed during the Public Consultation Exercise. National Highways has agreed to issue an information bulletin to Local Councillors before that meeting so that they are properly informed of progress.

The next significant project 'milestone' for the Council will be to produce a 'Statement of Common Ground' with National Highways and the other affected Councils (Somerset County Council and South Somerset District Council) and the three authorities are working on this collaboratively.

It is now expected that National Highways will be in a position to formally submit their application for a Development Consent Order in about August 2022.

In the meanwhile, the Council continues to support improvements to the A358 between Taunton and Southfields. The improvement of the A358 will provide important enhancements to the accessibility of Taunton as a high quality multifunctional sub-regional service centre and thereby further increase its attractiveness and success, helping it to realise its potential. The Council also

recognises that this road improvement scheme is part of a much wider project that will bring extensive benefits to the south-west peninsula as a whole. For these reasons, the Council's existing statutory planning policy supports the provision of a Henlade Bypass, traffic calming and improved junctions as part of A303/A358 improvement package.

Connecting our Garden Communities – active travel infrastructure for Taunton Garden Town

The Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) has now been published on the Somerset County Council website. It identifies a series of strategic routes to be delivered across the town and 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 has now begun exploring how the garden communities will link into the strategic routes prioritised in the LCWIP and how other missing links can be delivered. The project is looking at how and where modern, futureproofed walking and cycling routes should be delivered in order to better integrate the Garden Communities of Staplegrove, Comeytrowe, Monkton Heathfield, Nexus 25 and Firepool. The intention is to link to the strategic routes identified in the LCWIP, connect the communities to key services and facilities beyond their site boundaries, and address associated links which may have been missed by the LCWIP, whilst delivering against strategic green infrastructure opportunities.

An initial, informal engagement exercise has recently concluded with relevant ward members, parish councils and Taunton Area Cycling Campaign. This has aimed to introduce the project and gather initial community thoughts, aspirations and ideas at an early stage in the process to help inform the exploration of route options.

The process of auditing existing route options is now under way. The intention is to use the outputs of these audits, further evaluations and further technical and community stakeholder engagement to prioritise and justify routes for inclusion and produce an evidenced network plan which builds on the LCWIP, has broad community support and shows our ambition for connecting the garden communities across the town.

This network plan and supporting evidence will inform the forthcoming Garden Town Delivery Plan and provide a pool of projects to take forward for more detailed consideration as and when funding and opportunities arise. It will provide a key resource in negotiation on future developments and in future funding bids. In the first instance we intend to have more detailed concept plans developed for some of the priority routes over the next few months, taking some of the priority routes a significant step closer towards delivery once resources and opportunities allow.

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 with a number of elements to this project.

As previously advised, the complexities of water movement on the Levels have led to delays on producing a definitive map of the catchment area. This work is expected to be completed by the end of January 2022.

As Members are aware, on 5 October 2021, Full Council approved a Mitigation Programme of Interim Measures. A Planning Phosphates Sub-Committee has been set up to manage this programme. They are due to consider a number of officer reports on various matters and updates on the interim programme at their first meeting which is due to take place on the 10 February 2022.

Neighbourhood Planning

West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine (WM&CF) parishes have submitted a Revised Neighbourhood Plan to the Council. This is an update of their current Made Neighbourhood Plan. The Plan has been subject to public consultation. The Council and Parish Council have jointly appointed an experienced Independent Examiner, Ann Skippers, to assess if the proposed changes to the Plan are substantial and if this is the case examination of the Plan will begin in January 2022. The Parish Councils of West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine have revised 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

SWT Local Plan 2040

In light of the decision on a new unitary authority for Somerset the focus has 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 team has been focussing on the implementation of a number of placed based and other priority projects including phosphates work, Wellington Station, Firepool, climate change and funding bids. Officers are in discussions with the other district planning authorities to develop a work programme to agree a timeline and programme for a new unitary plan.

Town Centres health check

To provide evidence for Plan making, the Council went 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 (dwellinghouses) 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.

The Planning Policy team aim to appoint consultants in January 2022 for the project to commence on 1st February 2022.

Taunton Garden Town Infrastructure Delivery Plan

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

- i. *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 and will include an updated infrastructure schedule and delivery programme, consider developer contributions and collection mechanisms.
- ii. *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.
- iii. *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. Work is initially focussed on scoping the requirements of the platform and potential cost before finalising the commission of this third output subject to funding.

Completion of the IDP element is anticipated for March 2022, with work on stewardship and an online infrastructure engagement platform following on.

Taunton Garden Town – Funding

Bids were submitted to Homes England in December 2021 for Garden Town capacity funding 2021/22 and capital funding to support small scale infrastructure projects, either through their delivery or project development work. It is likely that the outcome of these bids will not be known until March 2022.

Wellington Station

Following the funding announcement in in October 2021, the Steering Group have been working closely with Network Rail and the Department for Transport (DfT) to finalise next steps in relation to the new stations at Wellington and Cullompton.

The £5 million of funding announced will enable the project to advance significantly through the next stage of project development and design, following the submission of the Strategic Outline Business Case early last year. The £5m will be administered by Network Rail as part of the Restoring Your Railway, Rail Network Enhancements budget.

The promoters, Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWT) and Mid Devon District Council (MDDC), have provisionally agreed with DfT that Network Rail will lead on the project from this point onwards, with support from their alliance partner Great Western Railway. It is felt that this will bring significant benefits to the project. The promoters are working with DfT and Network Rail to finalise the remit for the next stages; agree roles and responsibilities; and governance arrangements going forward.

Firepool

The LPA and Developer teams continue to meet regularly with regards to the development of a new Masterplan and Design Guidance for Firepool to resolve key issues and move things forward with a view to the LPA approving it as a material consideration in the assessment and determination of relevant planning applications. 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, consultation undertaken and planning officers are assessing them. All three applications will be determined by the Planning Committee with the access application due to be considered on 3 February 2022 with the other two applications to follow shortly thereafter.

5 Year Housing Land Supply (5YHLS)

On 23 November 2021 SWT published 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. From that date the Council can use the Governments Standard Method (SM) for calculating the housing requirement instead of the housing figures in the West Somerset Local Plan. Under the SM, which is calculated annually, the local housing requirement is 99 dwellings per annum (94 + 5% buffer) as opposed to 199 dwellings per annum (155dw WSCLP + previous years shortfall + 5% buffer). The buffer figure was set by the Housing Delivery Test Measurement (HDT) published in February 2020; and 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 along with those for the former Taunton Deane area to take account of the recently published Housing Delivery Test figures for 2021. It is proposed to keep the calculations separate for the two former authorities as allowed for in the regulations. We currently estimate that the former West

Somerset area will continue to have in excess of 5 years land supply, but the former Taunton Deane area may drop below 5 years.

An element of the 5YHLS calculation is the Housing Delivery Test (HDT) Measurement. On 14 January 2022 the Government published the latest HDT Measurement for 2021. The SWT figure is 76%. This requires SWT to add a buffer of 20% to its housing requirement. The past three years have seen a significant decline in delivery of sites across SWT, primarily as a result of the phosphates issue. There is therefore a risk that future HDT Measurements will be below the 75% threshold which would trigger the presumption in favour of sustainable development (NPPF 2021 para 11).

Net Zero Carbon Toolkit and Climate Positive Planning

The Net Zero Carbon Toolkit and update to Climate Positive Planning are nearing completion. The intention is to circulate a briefing email on these documents to all members in February and for both documents to progress to Portfolio Holder Decisions and be published soon after this.

SWT publications

1. SWT Authority Monitoring Report 2020-2021 was published in December 2021 and can be accessed via the Council's website:
<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning-policy/evidence-base-and-monitoring/authority-monitoring-report-amr/>
2. SWT Infrastructure Funding Statement 2020-2021 was published in December 2021 and can be accessed via the Council's website:
<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning-policy/cil/>

Development Management Update

Recruitment

The Senior Planning Officer vacant post has been filled and a new officer will join the team in January 2022. There is currently one vacant Senior Planning Officer post which was advertised in 2021 and no applicants were received. A further officer has handed in their notice, both posts will be advertised asap.

Performance

Workloads remain high due to the change in officers and increased amount of applications being submitted. An agency planning officer has joined the team and will focus on working through the backlog of applications.

Active Travel Projects

East St.

In 2020, SWT Members asked officers to consider options for enabling more active travel and public realm activity whilst considering the needs of all users. Successful stakeholder working groups took place in July 2021, with friendly collaboration between bus and taxi reps, local cycling group TACC, Taunton Chamber of Commerce and Somerset Disability Engagement forum. The working groups

resulted in concept designs that were presented to SWT Members in October 2021. Work continues to evidence compliance with the Equalities Act 2010 before progressing to public consultation.

Future High Street Fund cycling and walking schemes.

The active travel element of this grant allocation is in the final stages of procurement, with consultants to be appointed by Feb '22. These cycling improvement schemes focus on delivering an enhanced cycle route between Taunton Railway Station, through the Firepool and Coal Orchard developments to Vivary Park with additional cycle parking in several locations. Pace of delivery remains a key consideration, with all FHSF spend required by March '24, ability to deliver to these tight timescales is a core requirement of the successful consultant.

Consultation with local cycling groups has been undertaken to progress the cycle parking element as soon as possible.

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.

- Wellington to Taunton

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 route exploration undertaken via railway flat bed carriage, courtesy of the West Somerset Railway.

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.

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.

Steam Coast Trail

Progressing in spring 2022, the Steam Coast Trail will see the development of two further links. Fully funded by Friends of the Steam Coast Trail, the cycling network between Minehead and Williton will be two steps closer to completion.

The hugely popular trail provides places for people to walk, cycle, run, scoot or wheel, and recorded a phenomenal 165,000 trips in 2021, roughly 20% of which are cycle trips.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

Somerset County Council published the Taunton LCWIP in late 2021 and has recently announced a second round of funding for one LCWIP per district for smaller towns. SWT offered this opportunity to Minehead Town Council and Wellington Town Council, with the latter accepting and formalising on 10th Jan 2022.

The Wellington LCWIP will provide a plan for how best to increase walking and cycling for the town, whilst assessing key origins and destinations for connections, such as the Wellington to Taunton cycle path (above) and the proposed Wellington Railway Station. Ownership of an LCWIP significantly increases access to DfT funding for active travel infrastructure, so SWT welcomes Wellington's enthusiasm for the initiative.

Heritage at Risk Update

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

Phase 2 works are now on site for the next phase of targeted repairs using grant funding from Historic England.

Sandhill Park

SWT continues to work with the new owners of Sandhill Park towards the necessary urgent works and long-term plans for the building's future.