

# FIREPOOL MASTER PLAN

## Executive Summary

### INTRODUCTION

Firepool is a major regeneration area within Taunton town centre, for which there have been development aspirations for many years. The site presents a unique opportunity for development in Taunton, being in such close proximity to the train station and key services and facilities, as well as fronting the River Tone. However, high quality development needs to respond to its context and the range of opportunities and constraints present. The adopted planning policy context for the site (and the development mix in particular) is now out of date.

This Draft Masterplan has been produced with the intention to guide development on the Firepool site, responding to these opportunities and constraints, providing an up to date policy context accounting for changed circumstances including the Council's Garden Town Vision, declaration of a Climate Emergency, wider policy and guidance changes, and other material considerations.

It proposes an ambitious mixed-use scheme which will support revitalisation and regeneration of the town centre, informed by engagement with key stakeholders, evidenced studies and consideration by the Council's Quality Review Panel. Whilst the development mix and some of the proposals are materially different to those in existing adopted planning policy, appropriate evidence is provided about changed circumstances to justify an alternative development solution for the site.

Firepool is a complex brownfield regeneration site. Making more of our brownfield sites is core to sustainability and taking housing pressure away from precious greenfield sites. Brownfield sites are complex, expensive to develop and often marginal in terms of viability. Firepool suffers from all of these problems. Commercial developers have failed to deliver a commercially viable scheme which also responds well to the site's context and local aspirations. This is why the Council is now taking a more proactive role in bringing the site forward itself.

Somerset West and Taunton Council has dual roles in Firepool, acting as landowner, and developer as well as Local Planning Authority. These roles are distinct and sit very much independently in terms of preparation, consultation and approval of this Masterplan. However, the delivery of sustainable development on this key town centre site is of great importance to the Council in both roles.

As developer, the Council is bringing forward plans to deliver meaningful and sustainable development on a site that has sat empty for many years. Over the last 12 months, a series of detailed planning applications have been submitted by the developer team and approved by the LPA. The delivery of these elements is supported by Future High Street Funding.

The Draft Masterplan has been produced by the developer team and agreed for consultation purposes by the LPA. Whilst significant progress has been made, the LPA has identified areas where additional work is still required before the final version can be recommended for approval. Additionally, it is of great importance that the final Masterplan is informed by public consultation and feedback received is taken into account.

### WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS!

We are seeking the views from the public, local communities, technical stakeholders and the development industry on this draft Masterplan **until Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2023**.

To respond to the consultation, we encourage you to use the consultation portal:

[Consultation portal](#)

Here, you can access summaries of the key topics and proposals, respond to survey questions (including a quick survey!) and review all of the supporting material.

Alternatively, you can email responses or write to us at:

[Strategy@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk](mailto:Strategy@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk)

Planning Policy and Implementation Team, Somerset West and Taunton Council, Deane House, Belvedere Rd, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 1HE.

You can also keep an eye on the Council's social media outlets, and respond directly through comments there: @swtcouncil

#### PURPOSE AND STATUS

The Firepool site is allocated for a mixed-use, office-led development by the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (2008). A retail-led mixed-use scheme was granted planning permission in 2019. However, circumstances have changed significantly since both the original policies were written and since the retail permission was granted. As such, the adopted development plan policy context for Firepool, and in particular the development content proposed in policy can be considered out of date. It is important that development of the site comes forward in a way responsive to the modern, changed circumstances. The Council as LPA must determine planning applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. A new Masterplan is needed to provide an up to date and justified policy context.

A final version of the Masterplan is intended to be adopted by the LPA as a 'material consideration' in the determination of relevant planning applications. This helps to provide the Council as developer with greater certainty about what might be appropriate for future development proposals going forward, and to provide the Council as LPA with an up to date, evidence-based, justified policy context against which to consider such proposals.

It is important that the Masterplan avoids being overly prescriptive so that it can be reasonably flexible to further changing circumstances. As such it is the final key design principles and parameter plans, together with the justifications provided within the final Masterplan document which are explicitly likely to be adopted as material considerations. The Masterplan includes some more detailed design aspects intended to demonstrate how the key design principles and parameter plans *could* be implemented. However, these more detailed elements are indicative only.

#### LOCATION

Somerset West and Taunton Council area covers some 463 square kilometres and ranges from Exmoor to the edge of the Somerset Levels with major settlements in Taunton, Wellington and Minehead. The County town of Taunton is easily accessible from the M5 and its position between Bristol and Exeter has led to considerable commercial and residential development. The spatial strategy for the former Taunton Deane area identified Taunton as the primary centre for growth in the district, with town centre regeneration sites an important aspect. Firepool is the flagship regeneration site and key to delivering on the vision for Taunton. In 2017, Taunton was designated as a Garden Town.

The Masterplan focuses on the area shown via the red line boundary on the site plan.

- The site is located either side of the River Tone, adjacent to Firepool Weir, Firepool Lock and the start of the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal, and to the south of Taunton Railway Station. It's location between the station and the town centre, and facing the River Tone are key to the site's context and development opportunities.
- The station provides regular services to key destinations such as Exeter (25 minute journey time), Bristol (30 minute journey time), London Paddington (1hr 45m journey time) and Cardiff (2 hour journey time). This is in addition to services to local destinations such as Bridgwater and Weston-super-Mare.
- The northern parcel of the masterplan includes has areas which have already been consented (parts of Block 3 and Block 6). This design has been integrated into the surrounding masterplan design and ties in with the southern parcels. The Innovation Centre in Block 6 is currently under construction..
- Pedestrian and cycling routes along the River Tone provide existing connections to the town centre and surrounding areas.
- Somerset County Cricket Club sits to the south of the site on the south side of the River Tone.

The Firepool site has previously received planning permission for a retail-led masterplan prepared by St Modwen in 2019 (application ref. no. 38/17/0150), though this permission is now considered to have lapsed.

Subsequently, the site has been subject to a drainage and levels application (application ref. no. 38/21/0440) to raise the main part of the site out of the flood plain and remove/redirect existing drainage within the site boundary.

Parts of Block 3 in the north of the masterplan area have also been approved (28th March 2022) as a detailed planning application (application ref. no. 38/21/0436) for a new office building, conversion of the existing GWR office building and the northern section of the boulevard.

The emerging masterplan has informed the design of the, already submitted, Southern boulevard landscape application (application ref. no. 38/22/0176).

#### MASTERPLAN PROPOSALS

The Draft Masterplan proposes a mixed-use residential-led development comprising of:

- Approximately 430 dwellings with a mix of apartments, town houses and student flats.
- An ambitious commercial / leisure quarter potentially capable of accommodating multi-purpose venue, hotel, cinema, bowling alley, limited commercial/retail floorspace, health hub and nursery.
- Accommodation and integration of the already consented Innovation Centre and "Block 3" office and restaurant proposals.
- A central boulevard linking from the station to the river with onward connections to the town centre incorporating sustainable urban drainage, tree planting and high quality public realm including an amphitheatre fronting the River Tone.
- An improved and futureproofed walking and cycling connection along National Cycle Network route 3 on the north bank of the River Tone as well as other connections internal to the site.
- Sustainability features including centralised cycle hub containing secure cycle storage, low traffic neighbourhood design and energy centre for potential heat network delivery.
- Re-provision of the existing boat club.
- Open space and play areas integrated into wider public realm and green infrastructure.

A series of draft key design principles, (split across the categories of Garden Town, Transport & Movement, Site Use / Development Mix, Built Form, Sustainability and Heritage) and draft parameter plans are identified. These are informed by consideration of up to date context and circumstances, engagement with key stakeholders, and specific evidence studies. These key design principles and parameter plans will be fundamental aspects of the final Masterplan for future development proposals to consider and respond to.

## STUDIES

A series of studies have been undertaken to inform the masterplan and provide the evidence to support the masterplan work and these include:

- Draft Office and Retail Market Update – Broadly this demonstrates the lack of demand for office and retail development in the current market, justifying the consideration of alternative uses for the site.
- Draft Viability Assessment – this high level appraisal demonstrates the difficulties with delivering commercially viable and policy compliant development on the site and the reason why the Council needs to act as regenerator of last resort.
- Draft Parking Strategy – this evidences the approach taken to accommodating parking demands for the site.
- Draft Cycle Assessment – this considers the accessibility of the Masterplan for cycling.
- Townscape Visual Impact Assessment – this analyses the Masterplan proposals and their impact on the Taunton skyline.
- Heritage Assessment – This considers the impact on relevant heritage assets. It demonstrates that there are no overriding heritage constraints that would preclude development of the site that the Masterplan proposals would not harm the settings or significance of key heritage assets.
- Ecological Impact Assessment and Ecology Survey – These demonstrate the limited ecological interest of the site as a whole but the relative sensitivity of the river corridor. They have informed development of the Masterplan and supporting green infrastructure proposals.
- Nutrient Neutrality Assessment and Mitigation Strategy – This demonstrates the ability to achieve nutrient neutrality for the scheme, subject to detail, and that the Council as developer would appear to have a good prospect of securing delivery.
- Draft Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Environmental Report – being prepared to evaluate the environmental effects of the masterplan as per the findings of the screening exercise which concluded that the SEA should focus on air quality, biodiversity, climate change, the historic environment, landscape, sustainable transport, and climate change.
- Draft Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) Appropriate Assessment – this work is underway and when complete is expected to demonstrate that, following implementation of appropriate mitigation measures, there will be no adverse impact on the integrity of any European site, either alone or in-combination, as a result of development set out in the Firepool masterplan. This will ensure compliance with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended)
- Flood Risk Assessment – This demonstrates that the approach of raising the main part of the site out of the functional flood plain alleviates flood risk for this part of the site and in combination with the TTC5 flood works along the left bank of the River Tone will avoid raising flood risk elsewhere.

The LPA has identified that additional work is required in updates to the above as well as production of additional evidence documents in order to support the final Masterplan for adoption

## VIABILITY SUMMARY

High level draft viability appraisal demonstrates that the Firepool site faces significant challenges to enabling a viable and deliverable development. This reflects the market failure which has seen the site lay predominantly dormant and undelivered for the last 15 years as commercial developers have failed to deliver a commercially viable scheme which also responds well to the site's context and local aspirations. However, the Council has different options available to it which a commercial developer does not, and has wider interests in delivering increased economic, social and environmental value for the town centre. This is why the Council is taking a proactive role in bringing the site forward itself.

The draft viability appraisal demonstrates that fully policy compliant development is extremely unlikely to be viable. This means that policy compliant levels of affordable housing and other policy contributions are very unlikely to be achievable. It also suggests that delivery of the Multi-Purpose Venue is very likely to be reliant on securing significant additional public subsidy from elsewhere.

## PHASING & IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

SWT has sought to maximise funding opportunities that will help deliver the key infrastructure works that enable the rest of the site to come forward. The drainage and levels works will be completed first, providing the basis for the subsequent public realm works that will see the "boulevard" link from the station to the river completed, including the Amphitheatre. These works will start in 2022 and run through 2023.

These works will complete the raising of the levels and provide the Boulevard elements of the Public Realm which is being fully funded by grant funding and not Council borrowing. This will also upgrade utilities to remove the key barriers to further regeneration. It is expected the leisure elements such as the Cinema and Hotel will come forward as early phases with the possibility of being closely followed by residential uses, subject to phosphates solutions.

The Multi Performance Venue will be dependent on receipts from Firepool from commercial development and grant funding. Some flexibility around the venue may be required but the intention this adds to the leisure offer for the Town, subject to a viable business case. Leisure uses are intended to help fuse the retail and leisure experience in the Town Centre bringing new visitors into Taunton and encouraging those that already shop here to stay longer and enjoy a regenerated leisure led waterfront offer unique to Somerset.