

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Executive – 15 February 2023

Taunton Garden Town - Delivering our Vision, the Planning Context

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Mike Rigby (Planning, Transportation and Economic Development)

Report Author: Jenny Clifford, Garden Town Implementation Manager

1 Executive Summary/Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 Taunton was designated as a Garden Town in 2017. Following this designation the Council produced the document A Vision for our Garden Town in 2019. Intrinsic to realising the Council's Vision for the Garden Town, is the delivery of high quality, attractive and sustainable development through the planning process.
- 1.2 Officers have identified the need to produce a document which will set out the current planning context for Taunton Garden Town (TGT) in one place, with particular emphasis upon the policies within the adopted Development Plan, national planning guidance, local planning guidance and wider considerations of relevance. The document will reflect the current planning policy position in advance of the production of the new Local Plan for Somerset and signpost to the wide range of work areas and issues of relevance. It is intended for use primarily by developers, their consultants and stakeholders in the planning process but will be a useful reference for the Town Council and local residents.
- 1.3 This report sets out the contents and therefore the direction of travel of the proposed document and seeks agreement over its scope, together with the grant of delegated authority to the Assistant Director Strategic Place and Planning in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transportation and Economic Development for its finalisation.
 - 1.3.1 Appended to this report is a draft green infrastructure (GI) checklist (**Appendix A**). This is to be appended to the proposed TGT document and seeks to ensure a holistic approach to GI is taken from the early stages of the design process in order to protect, enhance and maintain TGT's green spaces, landscape and ecology. Aiming to promote best practice design solutions, the checklist sets out the Local Planning Authority's expectations for GI, asks a series of key questions to ensure consideration of GI matters and sets out what supporting material including drawings, reports or other evidence may be required to determine whether GI has been considered and integrated into the design proposal. It is intended for use by developers, design teams and consultants to inform the planning assessment process.
- 1.4 The recommendation at 2.1 seeks agreement to consult upon the draft at **Appendix A**

with agents and applicants within TGT. It is further recommended that delegated authority is gained for its subsequent finalisation post consultation.

- 1.5 No direct financial implications have been identified. The document is also not expected to raise legal implications as it does not set new policy but to draw on and signpost to current planning policy and guidance. However, once drafted it will be reviewed by Legal before finalisation as it will reflect on the existing planning context and how it relates to the delivery of the Vision for TGT. The proposed document is also not considered to directly impact upon Corporate risks or issues.

2 Recommendations

That Corporate Scrutiny Committee recommends:

- 2.1 That Executive Committee
- i) Agree the scope of the document
 - ii) Agree the green infrastructure checklist document for consultation with agents/applicants within the Garden Town
 - iii) Grant delegated authority to the Assistant Director Strategic Place and Planning in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transportation and Economic Development for the finalisation of the document and associated green infrastructure checklist.

3 Risk Assessment

- 3.1 The proposed document is not considered to directly impact upon Corporate risks or issues. However, as it is intended to provide an overarching planning context for the Garden Town, it will inevitably refer to topics such as phosphates and the commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, which are identified as Corporate risks or issues. Identification of topics relevant to the planning context for the Garden Town, together with the planning policies and guidance relating to them is expected to provide greater clarity for applicants over the issues the Council will expect them to respond to and the basis upon which they will be assessed. The intent is to achieve higher quality development as a result.

4 Background and Full details of the Report

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 Taunton was granted Garden Town status by the Government in 2017. The Government's Garden Communities Prospectus refers to the setting of clear expectation for the quality of development, how this can be maintained ('such as by following Garden City Principles'), to see vibrant, mixed-use, communities where people can live, work, and play for generations to come. It sets an expectation of exemplar large new development with high quality placemaking, embedding a series of key qualities: clear identity, sustainable scale, well-designed places, great homes, strong local vision and engagement, transport, healthy places, green space, legacy and stewardship arrangements and future proofed. In response to this Prospectus and subsequent successful designation, this Council produced the document 'Taunton, The Vision for Our Garden Town' (2019). This Vision for the future of Taunton is as follows:

"Taunton, the County Town of Somerset will be flourishing, distinctive, and healthy- and

the country's benchmark Garden Town. We will be proud to live and work in a place where the outstanding natural environment, diverse and thriving economy and inspiring cultural offer, contribute to an exceptional quality of life and well-being".

4.1.2 The Council's expression of interest for the Garden Town sets out the ambition to deliver a series of new garden communities around the periphery of Taunton at Nerrols/Priorswood, Monkton Heathfield, Staplegrove and Comeytrove/Trull, together with identifying opportunities for regeneration within the town centre. These are reflective of site allocations within the Development Plan. Intrinsic to realising the Council's Vision for the Garden Town, is the delivery of high quality, attractive and sustainable development through the planning process. Significant planning proposals including emerging masterplans are referred to the Quality Review Panel which was established in 2022.

4.2 Delivering Our Vision for Taunton Garden Town- Planning context

4.2.1 The planning process and associated decisions are at the heart of the delivery of the Council's Vision for TGT. Officers have identified the need to produce a document which will set out the current planning context for TGT with particular emphasis upon the policies within the adopted Development Plan (the starting point for planning decision making), national planning guidance, local planning guidance and wider considerations of relevance. The document will reflect the current planning policy position in advance of the production of the new Local Plan for Somerset. The Council expects new development within TGT to respond positively to the Vision and garden community principles. The document is intended to pull together the planning context and signpost to the wide range of work areas and issues of relevance. In this manner, the different threads can be drawn together for use by developers, their consultants and all stakeholders in the planning process.

4.2.2 Relevant to delivering on the Vision are a wide range of considerations including (but not limited to) the declaration of the climate and ecological emergencies including the commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030; phosphates, the impending introduction of mandatory biodiversity net gain of 10% and the desire to raise design quality. The document is intended to respond to these issues within the TGT context but will not duplicate other guidance documentation. The Council's Climate Positive Planning (2022) sets out interim guidance for the determination of planning applications over planning for the climate and ecological emergency. This is an example of where prior work is not intended to be duplicated but will instead be signposted through the proposed TGT document.

4.2.3 The proposed contents of the document are broadly as follows:

Executive summary

1. Purpose:
 - i. Set out the planning context for the garden town: local and national
 - ii. Signpost to relevant guidance and documentation
 - iii. Identify existing planning policy requirements within the SWT Local Planning Authority area regarding Taunton Garden Town.
2. Taunton Garden Town: Background
3. Garden Town Vision
4. National context - broad themes

5. Local context - identification of and signposting to other relevant guidance and documentation
6. Relevant Local Planning Policy and Guidance
7. National Planning Policy Context
8. Green infrastructure

Appendix 1. Table summarising specific planning policies

Appendix 2. Green Infrastructure checklist

Referenced documents

4.2.4 The recommendation at 2.1 seeks to agree the scope of the document and the grant of delegated authority to the Assistant Director Strategic Place and Planning in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transportation and Economic Development for its finalisation.

4.3 Green infrastructure

4.3.1 Green infrastructure (GI) is recognised as being highly important to delivering the vision for TGT. Within the Vision document there are extensive references to the quality of the environment and growing our town greener is one of the four core themes within it. This theme is expressed as follows and is one of the 'seeds' to deliver the Vision:

Grow our town greener- transforming our open spaces and streets

Quality of our Environment: give our town a green makeover, joining up our green spaces, waterways, parks and play spaces, planting more street trees and woodlands and managing our water more imaginatively with wetlands and rain gardens to improve it for recreation, tourism and wildlife.

4.3.2 Re-establishing connections to the town's landscape by making the most of our rivers, canal, streams and watercourses and their landscapes is an important part of this theme. There is also reference to connecting our green spaces and walks along corridors that reflect the watercourses, public rights of way, historic landscape destinations and proposed developments. In order to clarify the approach to GI, GI considerations and expected documentation to be submitted in association with planning applications, GI guidance and a checklist has been produced (**Appendix A**)

4.3.3 For clarity, the GI document uses the following definitions:

Green infrastructure (GI) is a network of green space and other urban and rural green features at all scales, which can deliver high quality of life and environmental benefits for communities. The key features of GI are that it is a network of integrated spaces that provides multiple benefits simultaneously, including social, economic, environmental, and cultural benefits.

Natural England's Green Infrastructure Guide¹ described GI as "*a strategically planned and delivered network comprising the broadest range of high-quality green spaces and other environmental features. It should be designed and managed as a multifunctional resource capable of delivering those ecological services and quality of life benefits required by the communities it serves and needed to underpin sustainability. Its design and management should also respect and enhance the character and distinctiveness*

of an area with regard to habitats and landscape types" (Natural England Green Infrastructure Guidance 2009).

- 4.3.4 The same document by Natural England identified that blue infrastructure is sometimes used to describe riverine and coastal environments with a green infrastructure network. Within the document, blue infrastructure is used to describe water elements, such as rivers, canals, ponds, wetlands, floodplains. Where it refers to green infrastructure, the document should be interpreted as also incorporating blue infrastructure elements.
- 4.3.5 The checklist is intended to be appended to the proposed TGT document. For use by developers, design teams and consultants, the checklist seeks to ensure a holistic approach to these matters is taken from the early stages of the design process in order to protect, enhance and maintain TGT's green spaces, landscape and ecology. Aiming to promote best practice design solutions, the checklist sets out the Local Planning Authority's expectations for GI, asks a series of key questions to ensure consideration of GI matters and sets out what supporting material including drawings, reports or other evidence may be required to determine whether GI has been considered and integrated into the design proposal.
- 4.3.6 It is important to note that the answers to the questions in the checklist do not have to be "yes", and therefore no additional requirement is placed on developments or applicants. The responses to the questions will act as a prompt to applicants and ensure that GI is properly considered in weighing up the planning balance of proposals by the Council. The checklist will be used proportionately in relation to the scale and nature of the proposed development, therefore not all of the checklist questions will be relevant to each application.
- 4.3.7 The GI guidance and checklist have been drafted to assist the planning application process. The recommendation at 2.1 seeks agreement to consult upon the draft at **Appendix A** with agents and applicants within TGT. This will raise the profile of GI, gain feedback on the guidance and checklist and clarify whether any amendments to its contents are required before it is finalised and implemented. It is further recommended that delegated authority is gained for its subsequent finalisation post consultation. It is intended for the final document to incorporate visual material.

5 Links to Corporate Strategy

- 5.1 The proposed document will pull together planning related documentation relevant to TGT in order to assist in delivering the Council's Vision for the Garden Town 2019. This Vision aligns with the objectives in the Council's strategic themes of "Our Environment and Economy," "A Transparent and Customer Focused Council" and "Homes and Communities."

6 Finance / Resource Implications

- 6.1 No direct financial implications are identified, as the document is to be produced in house rather than commissioned. TGT is supported financially by capacity funding awarded by the Department of Levelling Up and Housing and Communities. This supports direct staff resources and the commissioning of vital work to bring forward the delivery of the Council's Vision for the garden town. Further capacity funding bid rounds are expected. In addition, funding from other sources has been awarded, including Government capital

programmes to help deliver infrastructure associated with the project.

Unitary Council Financial Implications and S24 Direction Implications

- 6.2 No direct financial implications for the new unitary council have been identified as arising from this report.

7 Legal Implications

- 7.1 None directly as the proposed document will not in itself set planning policy, nor is it intended to be adopted as statutory planning guidance. Instead, it will identify planning context, issues, policies and documents relevant to TGT, articulating how these relate to and contribute to the delivery of the Vision for our garden town.
- 7.2 Prior to finalisation, Legal will be asked to review the document.

8 Climate, Ecology and Sustainability Implications

- 8.1 No direct carbon/environmental impacts arise from the recommendation, although the TGT project itself is expected to significantly contribute to the Council's climate, ecology and sustainability objectives, through work to deliver on the Vision. The proposed document will signpost to Climate Positive Planning, the Council's interim guidance statement on planning for the climate and ecological emergency.

9 Safeguarding and/or Community Safety Implications

- 9.1 No direct safeguarding or community safety implications arise from this report. The TGT project itself is expected to deliver improved community safety outcomes via the Vision in terms of quality of life, well-being and placemaking. Crime is a material consideration in planning decision making.

10 Equality and Diversity Implications

- 10.1 No direct equality and diversity implications arise from this report. The Vision for Taunton Garden Town is one of inclusion and quality of opportunity. All project activities, workstreams and planning decisions have regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

11 Social Value Implications

- 11.1 The National Planning Policy Framework expresses the purpose of the planning system as being to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development and identifies interdependent economic, social and environmental objectives. TGT is expected to bring about added social value through the approach to placemaking and the aspiration within the Vision to create environments that people are proud of, want to spend time in and invest in. The benefits of the overall garden community project are economic, social and environmental. The Vision specifically references growing social value through strengths in knowledge, education, culture and business.

12 Partnership Implications

- 12.1 None directly arising from this report, although TGT draws together a wide range of interests, stakeholders and partners, the governance for which provides a formal structure through which they can participate in and/or steer the Garden Town project.

13 Health and Wellbeing Implications

13.1 TGT is expected to deliver positive health and well-being outcomes through quality of place and environment, fostering active, healthy and communal lifestyles and enabling healthier and more sustainable journey choices. Health and well-being are integral to the Council's Vision for TGT.

14 Asset Management Implications

14.1 None directly arising from this report, although the stewardship (long term management on behalf of the community) of community assets within TGT is an area of work currently under consideration and has a planning context where new assets are created through development.

15 Consultation Implications

15.1 It is proposed to consult upon the draft GI checklist document at **Appendix A** with agents and applicants across TGT before finalisation. This report seeks agreement to do so.

Democratic Path:

- **Corporate Scrutiny Committee – No**
- **Executive – Yes (15th February 2023)**

Reporting Frequency: Once only

List of Appendices (background papers to the report)

Appendix A	Green Infrastructure checklist
Appendix B	Draft document: Taunton Garden Town - Delivering our Vision, the Planning Context - TO FOLLOW

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