

Firepool – Developer Statement

Firepool Masterplan March 2023



Introduction

The Firepool masterplan has been a collaborative process with clear lines drawn between the role of the Council as LPA and Council as stand in developer.

There is a suite of documents which deal with a wide range of issues to support the masterplan process. The purpose of this Developer statement is to provide comment on some key aspects that are not contained within those documents and draw out some aspects that are clarification purposes, particularly where viability and ambition are not aligned.

Further points of clarity / response to consultation questions have been collated in appendix A, which provides responses to queries that have not resulted in updates to the masterplan or supporting documentation but which merited expansion or explanation.

Statement of Intention

The Council has previously endorsed the principle of this masterplan in business case approvals in 2020 and 2021. They also approved the making of a Local Development Order (LDO), which has been superseded since issues around phosphates have arisen that prevented the LDO being followed.

The core principles are unchanged that being:

- Maximising the regenerative potential of Taunton's river frontage and making this central to the Councils 2040 Garden Town Vision
- A major public boulevard joining train station with river and river with town centre.
- Block 5 consisting of commercial leisure and related uses to support the Town Centre and encourage more visitors and existing visitors to stay longer.
- More residential units close to the Town Centre to create more sustainable living, to further support the Town Centre as high street spending patterns evolve post covid.
- A flexible master plan that can move quickly to development where the market allows

Venue

The SWT Executive has been supportive of the principal of a venue throughout their tenure, whilst acknowledging that the capital required to build the facility is unlikely to come from venue operators and is likely to need significant public subsidy, which is the case throughout the UK with many other venues being fully or partially funded by local authorities or other grant funding.

Specialist consultants IPW have produced a confidential business case for the Venue. They conclude that based on their analysis they believe that a c. 1,200 (seated) venue, achieving c. 1,600-1,700 maximum capacity in seating/ standing mode and scalable to operate effectively at c. 600 capacity, is the most appropriate scale of facility for Taunton and for Firepool.

This initial recommendation is based on:

- The existing competition in the local and regional market
- The availability of content, to drive an event programme
- The size of the catchment population and CIPFA Nearest Neighbour benchmarking

- Existing venues/ the current levels of competition in the local market
- The Council's strategic/ profile aspirations.

This report sets out potential profit and loss projections for the proposed facility, to identify the likely financial performance of a new venue in Taunton based on the market opportunity listed above. It is projected that, on reaching maturity (Year 3), having built a market presence and developed its event programme, a quality new venue could attract c. 90,000 visitors across c. 180 events per year and generate a small operating surplus.

The potential for cooperation and collaboration with existing venues and cultural providers in Taunton such as the Brewhouse and the CICCIC is yet to be explored in more detail at this time, as it is not possible to meaningfully predict a date when the venue would come forward

As is typical with cultural/ entertainment venue projects in all but a handful of markets, the levels of surplus that could be generated by the venue are insufficient to fund its capital cost. The Council understands this dynamic and instead views the Firepool venue as an anchor development/ attraction to boost Taunton's appeal and overall regeneration (attracting visitors and retaining residents) and drive economic impact for the town and wider catchment.

On this basis, it is assumed that the Council could provide the capital to fund the development of the new venue, but the Council has confirmed that it is not willing to assume any operating risk on the venue, once open.

IPW, a market specialist venue consultant have completed a soft market testing exercise with (appropriately qualified) prospective operator partners who might ultimately have an interest in assuming the management of the venue on the Council's behalf. This exercise has confirmed the following:

- The proposed facility and capacity identified through the market assessment is appropriate for Taunton and can potentially drive an operating surplus (while noting this is challenging)
- There is a lot of product available at this venue capacity, which Taunton could look to attract
- The absence of quality existing facilities of this scale in the wider Taunton catchment area creates a market gap/ opportunity
- There is potential market appetite to operate the venue and assume some/ all operating risk, though this is likely to be at best based around a nominal lease payment with a variable rent.

Transport Strategy and Connecting Garden Communities

Somerset West and Taunton, followed by Somerset Council, have ambitious plans regarding climate change that cover a wide variety of topics. One of the key elements of these aspirations is the reduction of the private car as a primary means of transport, which necessitates improvement to existing cycling, walking and wheeling infrastructure and delivery of LTN120 compliant routes with any new proposals, within a site boundary and infrastructure that connects to and from that site.

This iteration of the masterplan has evolved alongside other elements such as phasing, market appetite for development, emerging central and local policies, and crucially; viability. It has been a challenge for the wider ambitions of the Council to align with the commercial

reality of bringing this complex, difficult site forward alongside emerging and existing policy in this regard.

The transport strategies consider in detail the majority of transport and car parking needs of the site and provide analysis to support the proposal.

SWT adopted the “Connecting our Garden Communities” strategy as a material consideration in February of 2023. This work has undertaken comprehensive surveys of external routes and infrastructure in an around the wider Taunton area, including Firepool. It is the intention of the delivery of the site in phases over a number of years to address and take advantage of this groundwork to address, where viability and complexity allow, the gaps or quality of the infrastructure immediately adjacent to the site.

However, the scheme within its site boundary achieves LTN1/20 compliance and delivers massively improved pedestrian and cycle infrastructure where the needs of these users have been fully considered and will, act as an exemplar across Taunton about how to deliver the LPA’s strategy. This will address key issues mentioned in the strategy. More challenging, in terms of viability (but also scale and complexity) to deliver are links that are outside of the site boundary. Establishing how interventions that relate to the whole of the site whilst individual blocks or parcels come forward over time is complex and will need further deliberation between the LPA, the developer team as site promoter and any developer partners.

These include:

1. Narrowing of Canal Road and prioritising cycle access
2. Improved cycle links across Block 1 and linking with improved access where Block 1 meets Priory Bridge Road
3. Improved pedestrian access across Priory Bridge Road into the Cricket Club
4. Providing improved pedestrian and cycle bridge across the Tone

It is the intention that where funds allow these objectives will be achieved in a range of ways including:

- Working on the business case with the new Council and chosen Development partners to further consider the Canal Road/Priory Bridge Road access which will be brought forward in the design development work for the Hotel or the first application in the Block 5 area
- Working on the business case with the new Council and chosen Development partners to further consider the cycle and pedestrian access through Block 1 which will be brought forward in the design development work for the Hotel or the first application in the Block 1 area
- Working with the Cricket club and their emerging masterplan to ensure the Cricket Club is well connected to Priory Bridge Road and with the new bridge
- The new bridge project is being progressed within the regeneration team working in collaboration with the Firepool team.

Office and Retail Assessments

A key aspect of the masterplan is its flexibility. Although it sets out a development grid which is in fact very close to the form of the Town Centre Area Action plan 2008 design guide it is only the use mix that has changed.

It is more than possible that the current challenging conditions in the office market post Covid and as a result, greatly increased levels of agile working with corresponding decreases in office demand, may well be reversed as public and private sectors select to operate a less agile form of working practices. It is of course impossible to predict future working trends and with it the demand for office space.

It has been considered that an office hub where residents can rent a desk in lieu of working from home is a possibility. However with the completion of the Innovation Centre and the conversion of the Collar Factory in close proximity to the site those uses could render the development of new office space marginal at best. As with any element of the masterplan, detailed design and development will be supported by a business case.

However the flexibility in the development footprints at Firepool could allow for apartments above commercial space alongside the boulevard to come forward as office space to meet future demand. The needs of the office market will be considered further in future phases in the years ahead.

Historic England

Historic England have expressed concerns about heights in relation to the views of the Church Spires from the train station and from wider afield. It is the developer view that these matters have been considered and mitigated by the appropriate experts in the TVIA study. The central principle here is that the historic environment has already been greatly benefitted from the wider benefits of the Councils commitment to Firepool. This commitment has been demonstrated by persuading and making funds available to GWR to move the main station to the south and refurbish 2 Grade II listed buildings as a new Ticket Hall and the Great Western Hotel. The boulevard has been designed to embrace and played to focus on the Church Spires.

However, we acknowledge that as any part of a future planning application particularly in Block 5 that the heights of the hotel and in-particular the Venue are sensitive and those planning applications will have further specific TVIA studies to demonstrate that the impact is negligible. If that cannot be demonstrated, then every possible option will be considered to reduce heights to reach HE's preferred position.

Delivery Strategy

The working assumption of this Council is that the new Somerset Council will have less financial headroom to support major regeneration activities as would have been more easily possible and indeed supported by this Council.

A way forward paper will be presented to the new Council which is likely to set a path to achieve:

1. A developer that can deliver Firepool residential in Blocks or in total
2. A developer partner that has the capability to build out commercial uses such as the cinema subject to suitable pre-lets
3. A Developer who can work towards achieving zero carbon or at least Building Regulation plus subject to viability
4. The LPA is aware that the scheme has marginal viability and that it is unlikely that the scheme will provide S106 or affordable house contributions

5. A scheme that will broadly meet the masterplan agreed with the LPA but that the Council understands the need for flexibility
6. Zero carbon
7. The Council has committed to a Local Labour Agreement strategy, that has been adopted as policy by SWT, to provide for a 25% local labour usage in the construction of the disparate elements of the site.

Form of Transaction with Developer

It is envisaged that the public realm and estate will be managed by a long-term estate company. For this long leasehold interests are the preferred form of transaction with the end customers, but the points of detail around any offer are subject to negotiation based on the business case submitted

The Council is likely to want to retain the freehold and grant conditional contracted out leases on individual plots to suit phasing. The sort of conditionality will be around timing for making of applications and starting onsite. These conditions will have accompanying break clauses with suitable generous longstop dates. The Council may wish to retain step in rights if a site is substantively started and aborted.

It is expected that the long leasehold interest will be sufficient for first charge basis for those developers that will need to leverage against the site.

Programme

- Soft Market Testing March Q1 2023
- Report on formal process to Somerset Council in Q2 2023
- Likely outcome is a formal disposal process to commence in Q3 to start with a bidders day, subject to approval by the new Executive
- Appointment of development partner by Q3 onwards

Planning Strategy

This will need to be led by the Delivery Strategy and by the selected Developers. Key applications for continuing the work of the masterplan and specifically Transport and Historic England matters arising from Block 5 and to a lesser extent Block 1.

It is the working hypothesis that this will likely be a hybrid outline application for all of Firepool North. This may well be with less reserved matters for Blocks 3 and 5 and more reserved matters for Block 2.

If not a single hybrid then should for example the hotel come forward as a separate application key considerations such as the Canal Road/Priory Bridge Road and views in relation to Historic England's concerns will need to be addressed.

Summary:

Firepool is a site of great opportunity but also great challenge. The SWT teams have been working together to bring forward a deliverable masterplan that is both ambitious but underpinned by commercial reality. As the scheme moves further into the delivery stage,

with the Innovation Centre, drainage and levels and Trenchard Way access all scheduled to finish in the spring of 2023, momentum is now gathering – the next test for the new council will be to maintain this impetus.

Appendix 1: Post Consultation responses:

Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report aims to provide an easy to digest summary of post-consultation responses to feedback from the community, businesses, and statutory stakeholders. A separate Consultation Summary document will summarise the end-to-end consultation process.
- 1.2 Comments were collated across a variety of topics. These have been appraised and classified by the developer team, and a method of response assigned to each. These are:
 - The masterplan is directly changed to reflect the comment
 - The text in the masterplan report is updated / changed, or a reference to an existing section is highlighted.
 - A separate standalone comment or response is provided outside of the masterplan document
 - Comment is noted but no action is taken
 - The comment refers to a matter which will be picked up as detailed design in a subsequent planning application.
- 1.3 Comments have been grouped into similar topics to allow more efficient responses to be provided across the broad subject rather than providing a response to every individual comment.
- 1.4

2 Standalone comments and responses: Heritage

2.1 The following comments and responses are provided where they don't warrant a material change to the masterplan drawings or supporting narrative:

2.2 Table 1

Topic	Theme	Point Raised	Response
Heritage			
	Lock / Pump House	1. Consider more green space, picnic facilities, coffee shop, education centre re canal and railway - link through from site to Childrens Wood and Pump House, create purpose, encourage tourism. 2. The Pump House needs to be made into something useful (e.g. themed restaurant or museum?) concern it is being left behind.	1. Text 2. The Pump House is in private ownership. The SWT Heritage at Risk team engage regularly with the owners and have provided this update: "The owners undertook repairs to the building, on the single storey extension and the boarding of the windows on our request in 2021. They have been exploring alternative uses for the building which differ from the existing consent. We are expecting them to submit a pre-app on the site in the imminent future."

2.3 Note

5 Standalone comments and responses: Transport

5.1 Table 4

Topic	Theme	Point Raised	Response
Transport	Canal Rd / Station Rd junction	Capacity assessment required around both junction of Canal Rd and A3038 PBR, and Station Road and A3038 PBR.	LPA and Developer have agreed that the junction capacity assessments will be undertaken at a certain trigger point to be agreed with LPA. See updated Transport Statement and Framework Travel Plan.

5.2 Note

6 Standalone comments and responses: Use / Design / Venue / Cricket Club

6.1 Table 5

Topic	Theme	Point(s) Raised	Response
Use / Design / Venue	Public Conveniences	Are public conveniences being proposed?	<p>Standalone public W/Cs will are not proposed as part of the masterplan, as the number of publicly accessible buildings on the site will provided for freely accessible facilities that do not need public maintenance. Block 3 has allowed for a Changing Places facility in the footprint of the ground floor retail space.</p> <p>It maybe that the new Unitary Council and / or Taunton Town Council will make policy choices in relation to public conveniences and there is sufficient flexibility in the masterplan for part of one of the ground floor commercial units alongside the boulevard to perform that function.</p>
	Other uses	<p>1. Focus on providing public services on the site e.g. dentist, children's play, facilities for teenagers, community sport 3G</p> <p>2. No mention of public conveniences.</p> <p>3. Consider including a visitor centre for PEACE (People's Environmental Action for Climate Emergency) as per Full Council discussions in May 2019 and December 2019.</p> <p>4. Consider social centre to replace former youth facilities on Tangier and provide community hub for local groups.</p> <p>5. Consider use for academic / educational purposes.</p> <p>6. Need a lot more for kids to do."</p>	<p>The Masterplan does not seek to propose a use for every individual building or element of the site. Each of these can come forward as a proposal as each block is developed / delivered. The modular nature of the buildings allows for a multitude of uses, whether for cultural, community, social, academic or educational use</p> <p>A specific use that has been identified for Early Years and NHS use to reflect the typical contribution that a developer would be expected to make in this regard, subject to viability.</p> <p>As the site is not considered to generate sufficient surplus, the allocation of these buildings to these uses represents a commitment to these services.</p> <p>Early discussions have been held with NHS colleagues on the potential uses of the NHS hub and the principal supported. Although capital funding for the build is not confirmed at this time, the identification of the unit allows for this to develop as the different parts of the site come forward.</p>
	Venue	Request a professional analysis of potential market and audience for a new venue and how it would be impacted by (or on) venues across Taunton	The delivery of a Multi Performance Venue will be dependent on commercial development and grant funding. Some flexibility around the venue may be required but the intention is that this adds to the leisure offer for the Town, subject to

		<p>and its catchment (including but not limited to the Brewhouse). Recommend that arts and cultural provision are looked at holistically. Strongly encourage Council to look again at opportunities for the Brewhouse. Venue must work alongside Brewhouse.</p>	<p>a viable business case, which would have to consider the arts and culture offer throughout the town, district and county. The Masterplan is allowing for the space, should all of these elements come to fruition. If the MPV is not to proceed, then the site could be used for a variety of leisure uses, which could add additional facilities within the footprint such as soft play, café, fitness and dance/cycle and other sports studio space. The site could also be office use or a whole range of uses that could work in a flexible way within the footprint. See commentary in Developer Statement</p>
	<p>Relationship with Somerset County Cricket Club</p>	<p>Successful placemaking is key and connected to continuing success of SCCC. Desires of the council and SCCC as landowners need to be aligned to maximise benefits. Hotel and conferencing facilities will be an important future revenue stream for SCCC so need to be considered alongside plans for similar facilities on Firepool. Flexibility of masterplan, particularly the commercial uses will be important. It is possible that SCC Plans could form part of and anchor the Firepool project.</p>	<p>A successful and prosperous County Ground is good for the town and the site. SWT / Somerset Council are committed to working in partnership with the SCCC team collaboratively to ensure the ambitions of both organisations can be realised to the benefit of all. Meetings have taken place in early 2023 since the consultation ended and further meetings are to be arranged to align plans.</p>
	<p>Energy Centre</p>		<p>This is a £multi-million project that will be unlikely to be market led. A decision to progress the heat network project and with it the placing of an energy centre will be an investment decision to be made by the new Council. For now, the energy centre could be located in a range of positions in any of the buildings close to the river such as the venue/ buildings in Block 1 or Block 5. There is sufficient flexibility to provide such. There is grant funding available, but the initial feasibility work undertaken identifies this will still require significant investment from the new</p>

			Somerset Council. It is too early to establish the strength and commitment of the new Council to this project. However, the wider business case will be further considered and will form the basis of consultation with the New Council and then progressed as appropriate.

6.2 Note

7 Standalone comments and responses: Delivery / Programme

7.1 Table 6

Topic	Theme	Point(s) Raised	Response
Delivery / Programme	Delivery	<p>New Unitary Authority may have other financial priorities. What will stop future developers taking a different route altogether?</p> <p>Concern that plans appear un-costed and just another vision.</p>	<p>This complex project is likely to take 10 years to complete and is dependent on the state of the property market. It is unlikely that the new Council will have the financial headroom to part or fully fund a form of direct development. It is likely that a new Council will seek to appoint a development partner in the near future. It is anticipated that this will be a mixed-use developer and if so we would expect the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way forward paper will be presented to the new Council which is likely to set a path to achieve: • A developer that can deliver Firepool residential in Blocks or in total • A developer partner that has the capability to build out commercial uses such as the cinema subject to suitable pre-lets • A Developer who can work towards achieving zero carbon or at least Building Regulation plus subject to viability • The LPA is aware that the scheme has marginal viability and that it is unlikely that the scheme will provide S106 or affordable house contributions • A scheme that will broadly meet the masterplan agreed with the LPA but that the Council understands the need for flexibility • Zero carbon All of this is very flexible as it will be for the appointed development partner to drive the programme and this will respond to market forces, grant funding, political will and the overall economic

			<p>picture for the region and the country.</p> <p>The masterplan fundamentally seeks to enshrine in planning policy a roadmap for the future of the site, that is current but also able to respond to change in the future. The block-by-block approach allows for flex in quantum and use types. Detailed applications will address and respond to the specific elements of each business case for each block.</p> <p>Viability has been assessed as part of the masterplan work as is required by the LPA, but the new Council will not have the funding to deliver the whole vision. However preceding Councils have invested directly or via grant funding, in excess of £20m into the site to date.</p>

7.2 Note

8 Standalone comments and responses: Housing

8.1 Table 7

Topic	Theme	Point(s) Raised	Response
Housing	Housing Mix	<p>Lack of mention of social housing. Should be 100% / good proportion social housing. What % older persons housing? Focus on apartments 25% affordable homes required by policy 10% adapted disabled units required by policy Interest from affordable housing development partners.</p>	<p>The viability reports that support this masterplan indicate that delivery of affordable or social housing is very challenging. However there are potential disposal routes (including whole blocks to a registered provider for example) that could deliver a significant quantum of these types of housing, subject to market conditions, political steer and wider Local Authority policy. It is not the place of the masterplan to stipulate that level of detail at this stage. This information will be provided as part of Detailed Planning Applications and their associated viability assessments. The developer team can start to engage with the market, and developers of all types, once the master plan is adopted as a material consideration, and the new Council has set its new corporate priorities.</p>
	Student Accommodation	Location of student accommodation next to retirement apartments	The comment without context is difficult to respond to, but the broad inference that student

			<p>accommodation clashes with retirement because of an assumption of anti-social behaviour, noise or other disruption is not based on any evidence. Indeed the students that were based in Coal Orchard for two years were exceptionally well behaved, with no reports of any disruption, noise or nuisance.</p> <p>The student accommodation market in Taunton is led partly by the need to place medical students, or other key workers (eg nurses, those on placements, temporary workers etc) within vocational placements. These will likely be older or mature students. However, regardless of age or nature of study / placement, to assume that "student" = "nuisance" is without substance. Indeed, other elements of the site: Trenchard Way access road, mainline rail station, cinema, hotel and multiple houses with gardens etc are far more likely to be sources of noise & disruption than accommodation of this nature.</p>

8.2 Note