

Full Council Meeting – 7 July 2020

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

Local Plan

One of the first decisions I made was to begin the production of a new Local Plan for the combined district. As well as needing a unified set of policies to cover Somerset West & Taunton, we also need to bring the existing policies upon-to-date. We have progressed to an Issues and Options consultation, which included holding a series of successful and well-attended community events in early 2020. Since the consultation closed we have been carefully considering responses and have recently shared a Part One report of consultation with our Member Working Group. A number of key elements of the evidence base to inform the new plan have also been commissioned / completed. Perhaps one of the key outcomes emerging from this work is that so many of the homes imagined under the previous local plan remain unbuilt that we will not need to make allocations on the same scale as in 2011 in order to stretch our plan period from 2028 to 2040.

Pedestrianisation

Another early decision was to proceed with the plan to pedestrianise St James Street. This has bedded down well and made the area a more attractive shopping proposition. We have also assisted traders with their rebranding as the Independent Quarter, a move which is finding real legs as we emerge from retail lockdown. The completion of the Coal Orchard development will help cement the Independent Quarter at the heart of the town.

Local Development Order for Small Scale Employment sites

We have also progressed a pioneering Local Development Order for Small Scale Employment sites, consulting in early 2020. The finished LDO will be formally adopted in the coming months and will streamline the planning process, facilitating the expansion of small business. Finding the first set of premises as a small business expands from the kitchen table or spare bedroom can be a real stumbling block and this initiative aims to both help businesses in their early growth phase and retain them in the district.

Taunton Garden Town Vision

We adopted our Garden Town Vision last summer. Since then we have adopted our GT Charter and Checklist: the benchmark against which we will consider design of new development in the Garden Town.

District Design Guide & Public Realm Strategy for Taunton

A draft Design Guide for the district and Public Realm Strategy for Taunton were also subject to consultation and similarly will be formally adopted in the coming months.

Taunton Transport Strategy

Last summer we dusted off the Taunton Transport Strategy, begun by the previous administration but left incomplete. We made some fairly significant changes to the document and intend to publish it later this year.

Future High Street Fund

Officers have worked up final submissions to the Future High Street Fund, focussing in the first instance on a 'shovel ready' scheme bid for the Coal Orchard project and more recently centred around Firepool and the creation of improved walking and cycling infrastructure linking the Railway Station to Vivary Park.

Re-opening Our Railways Fund

A successful joint bid was submitted to the Government's Reopening Our Railways Fund. We will now be working closely with Mid Devon DC, DCC, SCC and other partners to undertake more detailed feasibility to secure the reopening of mainline rail services in both Cullompton and Wellington.

Development Management

The Development Management team has seen considerable change in personnel over the past 12 months with successful appointment of key officers. Significant applications and proposals have been progressed including those relating to new garden communities. We also recently welcomed Nick Bryant, who has moved across from Strategy to take on overall responsibility for DM as well.

Since Covid lockdown the DM team have worked to make a number of changes to ensure the continued operation of the planning function. This has included working closely with Democratic Services to move to online virtual committee meetings. These have been bedded in using some simpler applications and are now running really quite smoothly ahead of the challenge of determining some larger and more complex applications in the coming months. Good progress has been made over the last year towards achieving statutory targets for determination of planning applications, an area where performance had fallen away following the problematic reorganisation of the council.

Heritage

Our Heritage Team has been busy working on, amongst other projects, three key sites: -

1. Wellington Monument, where work has begun on a £3m project to repair and restore this important local landmark;
2. Tonedale Mills, where we have been working towards a satisfactory conclusion of a period in which the heritage asset has deteriorated; and
3. Sandhill Park, where a series of badly-managed "enabling developments" have taken place without securing the intended restoration of the Grade 2* Listed Building at the centre of the Sandhill Park Estate

Planning Committee

Following initial training for Planning Committee members, I have instituted a rolling programme of continuous training for existing and potential members of

the committee in order to keep them up-to-speed with the role of the position and changes to the planning system.

Firepool

I have been part of the team of four members steering the progress of the key Firepool site and have worked with officers and members in order to bring the proposal to submission of the LDO, expected in a few months' time, before work finally begins by the end of the year.

Planning

We've tried to keep the planning show on the road throughout the Covid Emergency and can report that there has been no real change in the number of planning applications submitted.

Covid Recovery

The administration sees construction as playing a key role in recovery from the inevitable economic slump that will follow and I am determined that our planning functions play their full part in enabling that. Some of the effects will be temporary and capable of resolution. Others will be permanent and possibly quite damaging and will require fresh thinking from us as a Council. I'm thinking in particular of the enduring impact on the retail sector, a sector that was struggling before the Covid Emergency. I have already tasked SMT with imagining the range of possible outcomes and devising an appropriate planning environment to adapt to those possible changes.

In order to help our retail sector emerge from lockdown, we have been at the forefront of work temporarily to pedestrianise East Street, where pavements are too narrow to accommodate social-distancing shoppers, even when reduced to 1m. This has been very largely well-received by town users and we continue to work with SCC to resolve consequential issues such as disabled parking.

Parking

We have begun work on a district-wide parking strategy, though progress has been delayed by the transfer of Strategy resources to other pressing areas during the Covid Emergency. We took the decision early in the Emergency to suspend charging in our car parks, to help key workers and for health and safety reasons. This suspension remains in force, partly for the same reasons but also in order to help re-inflate the local economy by drawing in shoppers to our commercial centres. When we eventually re-impose charging, we will be ready to trial hour-free car parking at one or more locations, a key manifesto commitment.

Park and Ride

I have guided the council through the process of continuing to subsidise the County Council's Park & Rides, towards the goal of taking full control of them

and the associated bus service, having already planned a whole series of improvements to the service.

Galmington Playing fields

I have also worked as part of the team that is seeking to resolve the issues surrounding the previous administration's controversial decision to permit the construction of a cancer centre on council-administered land adjacent to Musgrove Park Hospital. We continue to work towards a satisfactory resolution of this inherited position.

Councillor Mike Rigby