

Full Council Meeting – 27 July 2021

Report of Councillor Mike Rigby – Planning and Transportation

Active Travel

East St.

Active Travel PII funding has been secured for the next phase of East St. Somerset County Council reopened East St to general traffic on 24 May 2021 with the intention of alleviating traffic congestion caused by multiple planned works around Taunton. Working group sessions have started in June and July to help SWT understand the impact of any changes on multiple stakeholders. To accompany these discussions, urban designers and transportation consultants will present ‘the Art of the Possible’ for the future of East St with a view to producing some design schemes for East St that may be taken forward.

St James St.

The temporary order for the closure of St James Street is to be made permanent.

Future High Street Fund.

On 2 June 2021, SWT received the official offer letter from MHCLG confirming the award of £13,962,981 of Future High Street Funds for work in Taunton. As set out in the bid this will be used for the Coal Orchard, Firepool and Active Travel. The first payment for the financial year 2021/22 has been received and includes £750k to begin work on Taunton Town Centre Cycle and Pedestrian Improvements.

Specifically, this will include a series of improvements in St James Street, North Street and Upper High Street, in order to contribute to a cycle route from the Train Station through to Vivary Park and East Reach, overlapping with the East St specific work. Now funding has been secured the next step is to carry out a procurement exercise to engage a contractor to begin work on the scheme in the Autumn. Consultation with local cycling groups will continue as the details of the schemes is developed

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.

Taunton – Wellington

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 proposed meeting with West Somerset Railway to access the railway line at Bishops Lydeard postponed due to lockdown. 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, with a project group meeting and route assessment planned for Summer 2021.

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.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

SWT continue to work with colleagues in Somerset County Council on refining and prioritising schemes within the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan for Taunton with the intention of developing detailed project delivery proposals.

Development Management Update July 2021

Vacancies

Planning Specialist – this role has been filled by Darren Roberts who joined the Council on 24 May 2021

Landscape Specialist – this role has been filled and the officer is due to join the Council at the end of July.

Enforcement Officers – these vacant posts remain filled by agency officers. The advert for permanent officers will go out shortly.

Planning Apprentice – the LPA will shortly be recruiting an apprentice who will complete a Masters in Planning at the University of Plymouth.

Planning Specialist – Phosphates – a 12 month fixed term post has been created to appoint a planning officer to focus on the backlog of applications that are currently on hold due to phosphates.

Phosphates Budget Calculator

The Phosphate Budget Calculator is complete and is available on the Councils website, it has been approved by Natural England. It is a tool that can be used by developers across Somerset to provide a standardised and transparent decision-making tool for the Local Authority and developers.

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. Consultants were appointed in March 2021 to support the work. There are a number of elements to this project, a key one being finding deliverable solutions to the phosphate issue. Work is progressing in accordance with agreed timelines. It is anticipated that this work will be concluded in the autumn of 2021. The latest information is available on the Council's website.

Local Validation Checklist

The Local Validation Checklist has been consulted on and updated following the comments received. There will be one final review before it is adopted and available on the website.

Planning Committee

In accordance with legal requirements, since the temporary coronavirus regulations expired on 7 May 2021, Planning Committee meetings have returned to Deane House and for the decision makers are no longer virtual meetings. Meetings can however be viewed online in real time and the Council is exploring the potential for hybrid meetings in the future. We will continue to review the meetings and make improvements where possible.

Design Guide

A public consultation on the ~Draft Design Guide for the District and the Public Realm Guide for the Garden Town started on 5 July 2021 and will run for a period of 6 weeks until 16 August 2021. Details are available on the website. Following the consultation the documents will be amended to take account of comments received and brought back to Full Council for adoption as Supplementary Planning Documents.

Somerset Enabling Growth Project

All Councils in Somerset have signed up to the Somerset Enabling Growth Charter which is available at:

<https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2712/somerset-enabling-growth-charter.pdf>

Work on this project is continuing at pace. Current work streams are looking to align the conditions and S106 agreements across Somerset; consider improvements to the Somerset Ecology Service: update the Highway Authority Red Book and Standing Advice and a number of other workstreams.

Planning Policy Updates

SWT Local Plan 2040

In the light of uncertainties surrounding the unitary proposals the Council has not wanted to progress work which could be abortive or a waste of money once we become a unitary authority. The focus has therefore been on evidence based studies and elements of the future preparation of the Local Plan which are appropriate and

essential regardless of the outcome of the unitary process. The timetable and future progress on the Local Plan will also need to be considered in the context of the forthcoming Planning Bill.

The team has been focussing on the implementation of a number of placed based and other priority projects including phosphates work, Wellington Station project, Firepool, climate change and funding bids.

Current work areas

- Site assessments (~128 no.) these are considered essential to improve our evidence base for maintaining a 5-year housing land supply. This has become a more critical issue because of the impact of phosphate requirements on sites coming through the planning system. The site assessment work should support our 5-year housing land supply as well as being critical for the preparation of a new Local Plan (regardless of geographical scope following the Unitary authority decision).
- Sustainability Appraisal of sites coming through the assessment process;
- Progress Conservation Area Appraisals from SW Heritage Trust;
- Local Housing Need Assessment - Due for completion July 2021.
- Economic Development Needs Assessment - Due for completion July 2021.
- Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment - commissioned jointly with Somerset Authorities. Due for completion during 2021.
- Renewable Energy Feasibility Study - Council priority project hoping to be commissioned jointly with SCC and Somerset Authorities this summer.

Wellington Station

The Strategic Outline Business Case is now complete was submitted to the Restoring Your Railways panel on 12th February. We are now waiting on a final decision from the Department for Transport which is due to be announced over the summer. This will tell us whether it is appropriate to progress to the next stage of project development and if so, potential options for funding routes.

Tonedale Mill

The S48 Repairs notices have been served and discussions continue with the owners on their response to the notice and the emergency works required on site.

Toneworks

Following completion of the first phase of repair works, SWT have applied for further grant funding from the Government's Levelling Up fund and Historic England to enable further targeted works that will bring Toneworks back into use for community and cultural purposes.

Sandhill Park

Discussions with a number of parties are continuing to safeguard the heritage asset.

Wellington Monument

The National Trust are due to complete works to the Grade II* Wellington Monument in June 2021. It will hopefully be assessed for removal from the Heritage at Risk Register shortly afterwards.

Firepool

It had been hoped that a Local Development Order (LDO) would be progressed and adopted for the Firepool site, with a Masterplan and Design Guide accompanying. However, the situation with the need to provide mitigation for the impact of development to address the phosphate issue affecting the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site (as advised by Natural England in August 2020) means that it will not be possible to adopt an LDO for the site in the short term. Planning officers are working with the Firepool project team to agree a Planning Performance Agreement (a project management tool) between the Council as Local Planning Authority and the Council as Developer, in the interests of improving transparency and certainty and moving the project forwards.