

SWT Corporate Scrutiny Committee - 3 August 2022

Present: Councillor Sue Buller (Chair)

Councillors Ian Aldridge, Norman Cavill, Simon Coles, Ed Firmin, John Hassall, Nicole Hawkins, Marcus Kravis, Libby Lisgo, Loretta Whetlor and Gwil Wren

Officers: Amy Tregellas (Monitoring Officer), Sam Murrell and Jenny Clifford

(The meeting commenced at 6.16 pm)

23. Appointment of Vice Chair

In the absence of Vice-Chair, Cllr Nick Thwaites it was proposed that Cllr Loretta Whetlor was made Vice Chair for this meeting. (*unanimous*)

24. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Nick Thwaites and Habib Farbahi

25. Minutes of the previous Corporate Scrutiny Committee

The Committee resolved to approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 July 2022, subject to adding the comment from the Chair, Cllr Sue Buller, in respect of Item 9, (Page 8) Connecting Our Garden Communities:

“The officers and PFH concerned ensure that TACC’s proposals are embraced/taken forward by the new Unitary, as a supplement to the LCWIP if appropriate”.

(*App Cllr Simon Coles / Sec Cllr Ed Firmin*)

26. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr I Aldridge	All Items	Williton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	SCC & West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Kravis	All Items	SCC &	Personal	Spoke and Voted

		Minehead		
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr G Wren	All Items	SCC & Clerk to Milverton PC	Personal	Spoke and Voted

No additional declarations were declared.

27. **Public Participation**

There were no public statements or comments submitted in advance of the meeting by members of the public.

28. **Corporate Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Members did not have anything to add, although it was noted that there was room on the Forward Plan for items in October and November.

29. **Executive and Full Council Forward Plan**

It was agreed that the Forward Plans were looking rather bare, with only the usual quarterly reports listed as expected. Members did not make any comments.

30. **Corporate Scrutiny Request/Recommendation Trackers**

Cllr Farbahi in absentia had submitted some queries that he wanted answered by officers. These questions were in relation to a member briefing. These questions were passed to the Monitoring Officer who will be following up in due course with the Director of External Operations, and then liaising directly with Cllr Farbahi on his return, to establish what the outstanding issues are.

For it to be noted that future answers should be provided within 30 days unless there is a valid reason for delay (sickness, leave or awaiting information). Any reasons should be stated. It was not considered courteous for members to wait 6 months for a reply to questions and was a waste of time for the Governance team who were constantly having to chase the queries up!

Cllr Whetlor queried whether there had been any progress on the feasibility of analysing Firmstep to identify repeat requests for the same address, or where queries could not be cleared in the first instance? Page 29 of the report pack – *Followed up with Business Intelligence Team. Some initial work has been undertaken to investigate this, but it raised several issues that would need to be overcome in order to derive meaningful data. Such issues included, for example, being able to determine if repeat requests were for the same issue or whether subsequent requests were for something new. To analyse the data with this degree of granularity would be very time consuming and other priorities have prevented the work from being progressed so far. However, we are still hoping to revisit this and look into it in more detail when time allows.*

The members briefing on Phosphates was very informative and it looked like good progress was being made to reduce the logjam of applications being held. It was queried about who would be responsible for sending out letters and follow-ups to developers of affordable and social housing about the possibly released applications? *The Phosphates sub-committee is meeting regularly and there is some progress being made to release the held planning applications. Formal communications are likely to be released in the next fortnight but that is subject to Natural England agreeing to the proposed mitigation recommendations made by the Minister before work can proceed.*

Thanks were expressed to Sam Murrell for getting the trackers up to date and organising them to make better reading.

31. **Matters Arising - Updates from Officers on Written Answer Tracker Queries**

At the last meeting, the Committee requested that outstanding items from the written answer tracker were concluded and that officers from Economic Development be asked to attend the August Scrutiny meeting to provide a verbal update on the position.

No officers were present, and no apologies had been submitted. The Committee were very unhappy about the non-attendance and expressed their disappointment. It was asked that their dissatisfaction was formally recorded in the Minutes, and an explanation was provided for the lack of attendance.

The Monitoring Officer agreed to follow this up. It was also put on record that if in the future a written answer is not provided within 30 days, then officers will be required to attend the subsequent committee meeting to provide a verbal update!

(App Cllr Sue Buller / Sec Cllr Libby Lisgo)

32. **Taunton Garden Town Work Update**

Jenny Clifford presented a series of slides on the current work being undertaken in respect of the Taunton Garden Town. These slides can be viewed [here](#).

Councillors complimented Jenny on her presentation and agreed that most had a clearer understanding of what the work entailed.

Councillors raised the following queries: -

Questions were raised about the stewardship of assets once the District Council ceases to exist. How can we future proof them to ensure they are maintained? Who will be responsible – will it be the parishes, and how will it be managed?

The new development of the Garden Town would implement stewardship of assets as part of the planning policy as these new assets were realised. The transfer of historic assets would need to be done on a case-by-case basis as there is no “one size fits all approach”. District Council assets will

automatically be transferred to the Unitary on vesting day (April 1) and then it will be for the Unitary to decide their future. It could be done via transfer to a parish/town council, or other delivery mechanisms such as management company. Various consultations will be undertaken on the different types of assets before a decision is made, to ensure the best possible solution is realised.

Government Funding - Does being on the "Garden Town List" give SWT an advantage when applying for funding and trying to draw down money? What would happen if our known ambitions weren't realised due to a lack of cash-flow, or the funding stream was pulled?

Funding around the Garden Town comes from the Government and Homes England. Taunton is recognised as a garden town community. This earmarks funding specifically for development in Taunton and its suburbs. The Funding comes to SWT and we in turn can distribute it to those developers where there is a need. It also allows SWT to be savvy, in targeting its resources towards those funding streams where there is most chance of success. Homes England is very aware of SWT and its ambitions. There is an emphasis on new developments and not upgrading existing housing. The Government is focussing on new quality design and build. There are currently some issues being experienced due to Phosphates delay, but SWT is lobbying hard to retain the money.

How will the work of the Garden Town be impacted by the Community Governance Review (CGR) and the possible parishing of Taunton into a Town Council? The Monitoring Officer outlined the remaining timeline for the CGR. If it is decided that a Taunton Town Council will become a separate legal entity, then the priorities would be: -

- *1st phase priority of the new town council will be to safe, legal and functioning on vesting day (April 1, 2023). Councillors would be appointed in May 2023, and then decisions would be made about the responsibilities of the new council going forward.*
- *The 2nd phase will be to organise itself around the functions it will plan to undertake as a new authority. This could include a transfer of assets from the the new Somerset Council, which will be the principal authority after April 1, 2023.*

It was agreed that there needs to be better communication when it comes to promoting the vision, especially to people outside of the Council. Most residents are unaware of what the "Garden Town" means and how it affects them. How could this be improved?

Formalising Governance arrangements to include forums, customer panels and encourage broader participation, engagement and representation and thus greater understanding of the Garden Town project going forward. There is also room to engage more via branding and the website.

Who are the statutory consultees?

The parish councils and other public bodies such as police, health authority, SCC are statutory consultees. Any parishing of Taunton which

resulted in a new town council would also mean the creation of a new formal consultee. At the present time, the Chartered Trustees of Taunton would be considered a statutory consulting body.

It was considered essential that Building Regulations are tightened to ensure that all new developments meet a carbon reduction standard. A new planning process has been introduced which means all prospective planning applicants need to fill out a carbon reduction management form when new applications are submitted. If the form does not list adequate carbon reduction measures, then the planning application will fail. Although take-up on this is slow now, it will increase as the new county wide Local Plan for Somerset is developed.

An invitation was extended by Cllr Simon Coles for Jenny to present to the Taunton Chartered Trustees. Marcus Prouse from the Governance team will be following this up to set a date. It was felt that the Trustees would be good ambassadors to champion the Garden Town and promote its work. It was also requested that the slide show was made available in the web library and circulated to the Committee.

At 7.30pm Cllr Gwil Wren left the meeting.

Transport Hub – Mention was made of the previous presentation around Connecting Our Garden Communities. People will still need to rely on motor vehicles when travelling to Taunton, and the infrastructure needs to be able to cope. Benefit may be a transport hub which enables more Active Travel.

Transport is a SCC responsibility and most of their work is around sustainability and de-carbonisation. Active Travel England is a statutory consultee, and their plans are also fed into any development guides. More work around local Active Travel is being undertaken. There will also be a new future transport plan, and SCC is currently working on a bus service improvement plan.

Education Providers/Establishments – what does SWT do around consulting and interacting with the schools/academies around Taunton in respect of the Garden Town? *Jenny advised that this work preceded her employment so she was unsure whether this engagement was carried out.*

Phosphates – It was agreed that there were lots of ambiguities around the phosphate issue which were not going to be easily solved. Reference was made to reading the papers that had been circulated to the phosphates sub-committee for a more up-to-date understanding.

Some comment took place around the Design Guide and the focus on strategic sites. The Government has built up a national model design code and there have been some councils involved in a pilot project to work on this. One of the strategic issues coming out of this work is a requirement for Council's to put a Design Code in place, which ensures that the local characteristics are essential for new development within different areas of the district. The aims of the Design Codes are to raise the quality of new housing design and put in place parameters which new developers are required to respond to.

Cllr Hassall raised a question on the pedestrianisation of East Street conflicting with a proposed bus route. Jenny agreed to follow this up. Answer provided by Sarah Ellwood and progressed on the [Written Answer Tracker](#).

Cllr Cavill said his experience on Monkton Heathfield developments in the past was that developers very often side-stepped the rules to get more housing built and increase their profits. They used various arguments such as losing viability to reduce planning obligations and invariably managed to get away with it! How does the Council make it happen and enforce it?

The design guide has been adopted as supplementary planning guidance, so developers will not get permission if they don't abide by it. It carries substantial weight in the planning decision process. All development and planning applications need to be determined in accordance with the local and neighbourhood development plan.

Cllr Buller stated that Business and Culture should be separated as priorities as are substantially different even though both equally important. There should be an emphasis on improving opportunities via skilling up, levelling up, educating and boosting the economy.

She stressed the importance of making the Building Regulations robust so that they can stand up to the requirements of carbon neutrality and improving eco-friendly initiatives.

New development should be a quality design which enhances the town and welcomes visitors, "Build Better, Build Beautiful". (Nobody is inspired by faceless en-bloc housing).

Members thanked Jenny for her attendance and providing a detailed and comprehensive report.

(The Meeting ended at 8.11pm)