

# Full Council Meeting – 6 December 2022

## Portfolio Holder Report for Economic Development, Planning and Transportation.

### Planning

#### Taunton Garden Town – Governance arrangements

Proposals for a governance structure for the Garden Town were agreed by the Executive on 16 November 2022. The proposed structure seeks to ensure collaborative working and effective decision-making among public and private sector partners and stakeholders. Arrangements are now being put in place to hold the initial Delivery Board and Forum meetings early in the New Year.

#### Connecting our Garden Communities – active travel infrastructure for Taunton Garden Town

Consultation on the draft Connecting our Garden Communities plan took place from 29 July to 30 September 2022. Officers have since been reviewing these responses, and a final version of the plan (taking account of comments received) is due to be considered by Executive Committee in December 2022 and Full Council in February 2023, seeking approval as a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications. The plan is already influencing developer negotiations and funding bid preparation.

#### Mobility hubs – Taunton Garden Town

A brief has been issued to consider how the Council can support the development of mobility hubs at key locations to facilitate active and sustainable travel across the Garden Town. This will look at a network approach, typical components together with potential financial and delivery models. This complements work taking place on the Taunton bus station site and is intended to consider opportunities on a range of sites including the allocated Park and Ride sites at strategic sites in Taunton Garden Town.

#### Taunton Garden Town Infrastructure Delivery Plan and future stewardship arrangements

Arup were commissioned in October 2021 to support the production of an Infrastructure Delivery Plan for Taunton Garden Town and the final report has recently been received. Work on taking forward stewardship proposals (a key principle to realise the Council's vision for the Garden Town) is also in the final stages following consultation with stakeholders. Stewardship options are currently being refined and will take into account the recent Taunton Community Governance Review decisions over the establishment of Taunton Town Council.

#### Neighbourhood Planning

On 25 October SWT Made the West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine (WM&CF) Revised Neighbourhood Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan now it is Made forms part of the statutory development plan and will be used in the determination of planning applications in the West Monkton and Cheddon Fitzpaine Neighbourhood Area.

We have five other parishes undertaking Neighbourhood Plans.

#### Wellington Station

The promoters, Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWT) and Mid Devon District Council (MDDC), continue to work with Network Rail, GWR and other stakeholders through the Working Group, Steering Group and Senior Stakeholder Forum.

The current programme for delivery of the station sets out the Final Business Case to be complete by December 2023 and the station up and running by May 2025. Recent work commissioned by Network Rail has confirmed the precise location of the station at Longforth Farm.

## **Wellington Place Plan**

Somerset West and Taunton Council has commissioned consultants to prepare a Place Plan (including an SA/SEA Scoping Report) for Wellington, encompassing a Vision, Spatial Framework and Infrastructure and Implementation Plan. The Place Plan will inform decisions about the development, regeneration and conservation of the town and be a long-term strategy for the future of Wellington that will inform the future Somerset-wide Local Plan.

Consultants have now completed the Baseline Review of existing and emerging planning policy; and undertaken a visioning exercise and consultation with the community in Wellington including the Town Council. These will inform the draft Wellington Place Plan – a report is due to go to December Executive with a recommendation to agree to go out to public consultation in January/February 2023.

Following the consultation and any necessary revisions, the Place Plan is scheduled to go to Full Council in March 2023, for adoption as a material planning consideration. Once adopted, the document will be given weight in the determination of planning applications and considering regeneration activities to ensure we are creating a quality place in Wellington.

## **Firepool**

The Draft Firepool Masterplan was approved for public consultation by Executive Committee on 16 November 2022. Consultation was launched on 21 November and runs until 2 January 2023. More information can be found as part of the consultation hub at <https://firepool.commonplace.is/>.

Following the consultation period, comments will be reviewed and amendments made as considered necessary taking account of views received and work on outstanding identified issues. A final Masterplan is currently expected to be presented to Full Council in March 2023 seeking adoption as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Planning permission was granted for the “Southern Boulevard” (application 38/22/0176) via Planning Committee on 10 November 2022.

## **Transportation**

### **A358 Taunton to Southfields dualling scheme National Highways Consultation**

National Highways are working towards submitting their application for a Development Consent Order to the Secretary of State early in December (aiming for 5th). Given the procedures and protocol that come with this process, it means that if the Secretary of State decides to hold a Public Inquiry, it would likely commence late March / beginning of April (This is an estimation). This means that the Inquiry would most likely straddle the period when our Council merges into the new Unitary Authority. As a result, officers of the three affected authorities are working together to provide joint responses on all relevant matters and issues.

National Highways held a public meeting on 19 October 2022 (Community Forum meeting) at Taunton Rugby Club and all affected Parish Councils, interest groups and Members of the public where invited. It was a useful forum to update those present on progress and procedures and to hear concerns and queries from those with an interest in this project.

Council officers together with colleagues at Somerset County Council and South Somerset District Council are continuing to negotiate with National Highways and are involved in various workstreams. The next important milestone in the project will be the joint production of a ‘Statement of Common Ground’ between all of the affected Councils (Somerset County Council and South Somerset District Council). The three local authorities are currently working on this collaboratively.

## **Development Management Update**

### **Performance**

Workloads remain high due to the volume of applications, pre-application enquiries and managing the applications held in abeyance due to the advice from Natural England and the need to provide phosphate mitigation. There are ongoing vacancies and absences due to personal circumstances, resignations and some long term sickness and reduced hours across the team. Performance is also affected by delays in receiving responses from consultees in particular from the Somerset Ecology Service despite a new service level agreement, the Lead Local Flood Authority and highways. This is having an impact on performance.

### **Recruitment**

The service has a number of agency staff covering posts in development management as a result of a poor response to national advertisements for planning officer posts. This reflects the national shortage and is no doubt also affected by uncertainty of positions in the new unitary authority. The recently appointed Conservation Officer resigned to go back to her previous authority, this post has however been advertised and filled without a gap. SMT recently approved the request for an additional resource for enforcement to address the backlog and an enforcement officer will start on 28 November 2022 on a temporary contract until the end of March 2023. An additional resource has also been agreed to support the determination of applications held in abeyance due to the need for phosphate mitigation now that the Council's interim strategy has been signed off by Natural England and an officer started on 10 November 2022.

### **Major and Special Projects**

#### **Future High Street Fund (FHSF) cycling and walking schemes**

The cycling, walking and wheeling schemes are progressing well. The bridge planning application has now been submitted. The two crossings – a cycle and pedestrian-priority crossing at St James St on National Cycle Network Route 3 and a new Toucan crossing over Upper High St – are with SCC for technical review and are scheduled to be delivered in summer 2023.

The Crescent Car Park's cycle parking 'hub' is also progressing well with delivery scheduled for March 2023. Work will soon commence on additional cycling hubs in the town centre, with the former St James Bike Park the most likely next location. The hubs will provide Taunton's first such facilities, providing sheltered cycle parking with public cycle repair stands and tyre pumps. The pace of delivery remains a key consideration, with all FHSF spend required by March 2024 but the programme is progressing to schedule.

Consultation with SCC, RNIB and local cycling groups has been undertaken with further consultation to take place in the coming months.

#### **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.

- Wellington to Taunton

SCC and SWT have secured £50,000 from the Public Health active travel funding to extend the work to assess feasibility of providing an active travel route between Wellington and Taunton. Previous work was halted due to results showing a costly, highly complex and constrained conditions with 'low' or 'poor' benefit to cost. This next phase of work will consider how to provide the best value sustainable transport asset that will address the problem.

## **Heritage at Risk**

### **Tonedale Mill**

Discussions continue with the owners regarding the urgent works and the long-term plans for the site. Officers continue to work with the owners to try and secure the other buildings throughout the site. SWT are also recovering funds for works carried out in default in a S54 Urgent works Notice when the owners failed to complete the protective works to the listed buildings.

### **Toneworks**

Phase 2 targeted repairs using grant funding from Historic England, is due for completion in November 2022. A decision for Phase 3 works (funded by HE again) is awaited.

### **Sandhill Park**

SWT continues to work with the new owners of Sandhill Park towards the necessary urgent works and long-term plans for the building's future. Emergency works have been deemed to have started by the owner and the Emergency works package is underway.

## **Regen Programme**

### **Coal Orchard**

On 5 November 2022, SWT officially opened the last element of public realm at the Coal Orchard, with the Mayor, Leader of SWT and Rebecca Pow MP in attendance to celebrate this significant milestone. The event was very well attended, and feedback has been very positive on the high quality public realm that surrounds the mixed use units.

SWT have appointed a new commercial agent who will be following up on a significant list of interested parties, in addition to the four units that are under offer.

Completion of sales on the apartments has begun, with the majority of apartments now occupied. Due to the extreme weather conditions leading up to the launch date it wasn't possible to complete a small amount of surfacing, including the car club parking bays. It is anticipated that this will be completed very shortly with the car club operating before Christmas 2022

### **Bus Station**

A plan is emerging that will see the bus station site developed in phases. The first priority will be to put in place the Changing Places facility by Spring '23. The procurement process to engage a contractor for this work will begin by end of November, in Building 2 (the admin block to the west of the site). In parallel, designs are being developed ready for consultation and planning for re-developing Building 1 and the rest of the site, to deliver on the SCC led Bus Service Improvement Plan for a new transport hub in the Town Centre.

### **Firepool**

### **GWR building / cycle path**

The GWR Building continues to be used as a site office by the Innovation Centre contractor Wilmott Dixon. The temporary cycle path has now closed due to overlapping construction works, and will remain closed until it can be safely opened again, likely to be 2023.

### **Digital Innovation Centre**

SWT are continuing to work in collaboration with SCC on delivery of a 2400m<sup>2</sup> Digital Innovation centre on the Firepool site, with construction activity now in progress. Civil and decontamination works started in October 2021, with a delivery programme of circa 18 months.

### **Infrastructure, Utilities and Flood work**

Infrastructure work commenced on 7 November 2022, with a build programme of approximately 6 months.

Phase 1 of flood defence design work at Firepool Lock has been completed, in collaboration with the Environment Agency and Canals and Rivers Trust. Responses from the public consultation in late summer have been fed into the next stage of the design process, along with further discussions with stakeholders.

### **Block 3 (north of Canal Road)**

Planning permission has also been granted for the block north of Canal Road. Delivery of this element of the site will be coordinated with the works to the Innovation Centre opposite to ensure the two projects do not conflict or compete for space or access.

### **Boulevard & Public Realm**

Planning permission was granted for the Southern Boulevard (including amphitheatre) in November 2022. It is expected that Block 3 and the boulevard will be brought together as a single construction programme to commence after the infrastructure, Innovation Centre and access works have completed Spring 23.

### **Heat Network Mapping, Masterplanning and Early Feasibility**

In December 2020 the Council applied to the Government's Heat Network Delivery Unit for funding towards a mapping, masterplanning and early feasibility study to consider potential for heat network development in Taunton. In June 2021, the Council received confirmation that it had been successful in its bid. Since June 2022, the Council has been working with consultants Sustainable Energy Ltd to undertake this project looking into potential heat networks. The project looks at energy demands, heat supply opportunities, energy centre locations, and initial techno-economic feasibility. The project has involved close co-operation between officers from the major projects team and planning policy and engagement with the County Council and other potential stakeholders in order to understand constraints and opportunities. Emerging work has resulted in the Draft Firepool Masterplan identifying potential for an energy centre within the site. The consultant's report is due in the next few months at which point the findings will be reported to Members alongside any appropriate recommendations.

### **Heritage Assets**

#### **Wellington Green Space & Fox's Field**

The purchase of the Green Space in Wellington was approved at Full Council in July 2022 and is currently awaiting the S24 decision to proceed. It is intended to hand the site over (alongside Fox's Field) to Wellington Town Council for long-term lease and management working closely with the community.

### **Economic Development**

This report provides a summary of the achievements of the Economic Development function over the last 12 months and plans for the remainder of the term until vesting day of the New Somerset Council.

The achievements contribute toward the delivery of the Councils Corporate Priorities and [SWT Economic Development Strategy 2021 – 2024](#)

### **Future readiness: Strategies and Plans**

- **Development of Somerset and Somerset West and Taunton Covid Recovery & Growth Plans**
- **Facilitation of the Minehead Plan – Inspiring People and Place** – a refreshed strategy for the economic development priorities for Minehead and its community
- **Secured SWT priorities in the Somerset Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan** – the development of key objectives and intended areas of intervention around people, place and prosperity in response to a government call for a prospectus to support £7.2m of funding over the next three years
- **Developed new SWT Cultural Strategy** - supporting the development of the cultural sector and cultural themes founded on knowledge, culture, and business; A Somerset cultural strategy is now in development.
- **Input into Somerset Futures Scenarios strategy** – identifying issues and opportunities to develop a range of scenarios to inform future economic development strategic thinking and ability to focus effort in light of changing environment and societal circumstances
- **Development of the business and economy chapter of the Garden Town Prospectus**

### **Future readiness: Innovation**

- **Commissioned review of Innovation models suitable for SWT.** – a review of innovation assets, institutions, and business sectors to underpin the development of a knowledge economy for SWT as an innovation district
- **Commissioned Connected Places Catapult Phase 1 review and report** – validated the approach to establishing an innovation district in SWT, setting out the principles by which it needs to operate, governance model and a detailed short-term term action plan.
- **Launch and delivery of the first Somerset Innovation Conference** – to identify future markets, funding, network, and collaboration opportunities for businesses to support the development of an innovation ecosystem across Somerset
- **Co-developed £11m Digital Innovation Centre** – led on stakeholder and business input into the development of the business case for a Digital Innovation Centre in Taunton and co-commissioning of a service provider.

### **Inward Investment**

- **Development of new Inward Investment brand for Somerset West and Taunton** (potential to transfer to new Somerset Council)
- **Launch of new inward investment website and national marketing campaign** - promotes SWT as a business 'growth hotspot', targeting growth sectors.
- **Delivery of Switch marketing communications plan & ambassador group launch** - to develop sector propositions and delivery with stakeholder activity to market SWT as a place to invest.
- **Co-design of business rates funded LEP/Somerset inward investment programme**
- **Employment Land study** - secured the completion of a feasibility study for the use of Council owned potential employment sites in West Somerset

### **Town Centre Regeneration**

- **Delivered £950k Town Centre Covid Recovery Support Package** - to fund events, public realm improvements, marketing, and attractions to draw shoppers and visitors back to the High Streets across the District & appointment of a Taunton town centre manager
- **Supported Inward Investment and growth propositions into empty shop units in Taunton** – now below national vacant unit rate (Minehead also below national rates).
- **Delivered package of Covid Town Centre safety measures** - public realm initiatives, signage, road closures and business advice packages to ensure businesses were able to comply with social distancing and Covid safety measures and consumers were able to shop safely.
- **Delivery of Taunton Town Centre Event programmes** - to increase footfall, including Jubilee Party in the Park and Goodland's Gardens Rainbow Path
- **Established Town centre and High Streets action groups** - significantly improved engagement and communication with the businesses, town and parish councils and key organisations across the District including business focussed webinars and workshops

### **Business and Employment Retention**

- **Awarded £7m Covid Discretionary Fund Grants** - to support business retention of key employers and SMEs.
- **Established Response to Redundancy and Employee Retention Task Force** - gained partnership input into an emergency support package for businesses at risk of redundancy and support for employees.
- **Creation of a guide for employers to recruit and retain staff** – to assist with labour shortages in key sectors.

### **Sector Growth and Development: Tourism**

- **Established Service Level Agreements with Destination Management organisations** – Securing funding for Visit Somerset and Visit Exmoor to deliver visitor economy services.
- **Undertook South West Tourism Research project and Somerset Visitor Survey** – on behalf of Hinkley Point Tourism Partnership.
- **Secured Tourism Innovation Grants for 14 projects in Somerset West and Taunton**
- **Developed and promoted new tourism offers, packages and itineraries for the Coastal Strip**
- **Developed and delivered the BOOST tourism toolkit** – including six business support modules, supporting 150 Tourism businesses.
- **Co-ordinated West Coast 360 programme** – supporting excellence in the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors in West Somerset and events to inspire people to work in the sector
- **Delivery and oversight of Enterprising Minehead Projects** – including public realm improvements on the esplanade, art installations and play equipment

### **Sector Growth and Development: Food & Drink Sector**

- **Commissioned an audit of the Food, Drink and Agriculture supply chain and developed a local supply chain portal** - Successful events held to outline opportunities and resources available to the sector.

### **Skills and Employment**

- **Established and delivered Community Employment Hubs across the District** – secured funding to extend for a further 12 months. Established Volunteer Recruitment

and Management policies for SWT and recruited 20+ volunteers to support hubs. Established a hub at the Ukrainian Guest Support hub in Taunton.

- **Funded and facilitated the reopening of the vocation centre at West Somerset College** -Working with the West Somerset Opportunity Area to provide new adult learning opportunities while providing a pipeline of skilled labour for Hinkley Point C and delivered a package of IT training for parents of school-aged children.
- **Delivered an action plan to respond to labour shortages** - as a result of the EU transition and Covid 19 in specific sectors including a programme of Virtual careers fairs, meet the employer virtual events and traditional careers fairs
- **Implementation of HPC Drop In's** to support HPC recruitment. Held virtually and face-to-face jointly with Sedgemoor District Council

### **Improve use of Business and Town Centre Data**

- Commissioned Business Data and Town Centre data platforms
- Created Town centre footfall and events dashboards

### **Planned activity to vesting day of the new Somerset Council**

- **Launch a Visitor Economy and Food and Drink Sector Capacity Building/Green Grant Programme** - in autumn/winter 2022
- **Deliver Visitor Economy SMEs drop-in seminars** – Winter 2022
- **Commission a 'Deep Dive' review of SWT businesses** – to identify unique innovation offers with the aim to market these nationally.
- **Develop and implement a Social Value & Local Labour Agreement policy-** as part of a planning approach to secure local skills and employment offers in approved developments
- **Continued delivery of the Community Employment Hub model.**

### **External Operations & Assets**

#### **General**

Much of the Team's time in this period has been spent in support of LGR Workstreams, especially Property Assets Optimisation, and work to facilitate the transfer of assets to the new Taunton Town Council. There is ongoing audit of data and population of the new Technology Forge property assets database which will go live in stages over the next period. We also gave continued support to projects such as Coal Orchard and Tone Works (headed by Major Projects and Heritage) and Wellington Sports Centre decarbonisation led by Leisure and Climate Change.

In addition, active tenant management has seen completion of 16 minor leases, 7 rent reviews and 2 lease assignments.

#### **Significant Corporate Works**

Watchet Lighthouse – repainting completed.

Stogursey Church Wall – rebuild project on track to complete before Christmas.

Taunton Crematorium – electrical safety works underway and programmed to allow continued service delivery.

Taunton Green Pavilion – refurbishment works commenced.

Vivary Park Bandstand – underpinning works commenced.

Market House – power supply upgrading ordered to comply with modern standards

### **Tower Street Vaccination Centre (former bus station), Taunton: new lease to NHS**

A new lease to the NHS for the Tower Street centre should complete by the end of November 2022 and this will allow the vaccination centre to continue during the season of peak demand for Covid and Flu vaccines. The lease has mutual break clauses to allow flexibility for both parties.

### **West Somerset Railway, Bishops Lydeard: Disposal of Car Park and Toilets**

This should complete by the end of November 2022, having been delayed by solicitor's holiday.

Receipt of £50,000

### **Unit 3 Blackdown Business Park, Wellington: Sale to occupying tenant**

Delayed awaiting s24 Approval to complete sale at £230,000.

### **Blenheim Gardens Café, Minehead: refurbishment and new lease**

Planning consent for the wider scheme withdrawn by tenant on planning advice and minor refurbishment proceeding for Spring 2023 opening. Acceptable EPC received and lodged.

### **Parks Walk (closed) PCs, Minehead: Lease Interest**

Following receipt of an expression of interest to open a café in the long closed toilets on the junction of Parks Walk and Woodcombe Walk, the opportunity was advertised to see if anybody else was interested. No further applicants emerged and negotiations are underway with the original applicant for a lease following his undertaking extensive refurbishment works.

### **Former Mount Street Nursery: lease of part and management of remainder**

The proposed car park extension for the Taunton Deane Cricket Club is being discussed with the planning team, following which we will agree a new lease to include the additional area. Avon & Somerset Police is assisting in management of the ASB issues on the remainder of the site until its future as an ecological green space is determined.

### **Car Parks**

The new machines which were installed within the West Somerset area of the district have been a success. The information which can be viewed via the back-office reporting function has allowed for future decisions to be made which are based on factual data.

Cashless payments have increased from 51% in September 2021 to 61% in September 2022. This increase has been supported by the cashless payment options which are available on the new machines which were installed in April 2022. Due to the increase in cashless payments a review of the cash collection frequencies is being implemented to reduce costs.

Crescent Car Park Improvement project has now completed the tender for the works and evaluation. The works are due to start in early January. The works will be delivered in two phases to reduce disruption. Once complete a total of 19 new EV charges will be installed and the car park will include the introduction of new trees, a cycle shelter and clear pedestrian walkways.