

**Somerset West
and Taunton**

Connecting our Garden Communities

***Strategic Environmental Assessment and
Habitat Regulations Assessment***

Screening Report

Version	Purpose	Date
1	For internal consultation	11/07/2022
2	For consultation with consultation bodies	26/07/2022
3	Final report to support final plan	09/12/2022

Connecting our Garden Communities

SEA/HRA Screening Report

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1. Introduction and Summary

- 1.1 Connecting our Garden Communities is a plan for ensuring modern, futureproofed walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure accompanies the delivery of key developments across Taunton Garden Town. The plan sets out the Council's aspirations for delivery of a network of walking, wheeling and cycling routes across the town, which are explicitly intended to serve the needs of the Garden Communities, whilst also serving existing communities. It builds on the work already in train in relation to town centre routes including that funded through the Future High Streets Fund, and the network planning undertaken in support of the Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).
- 1.2 The plan is focused around the identification and appraisal of routes, and importantly not their detailed design, which will follow. Exact routings may be subject to change. The detail of the infrastructure provision is not set by this plan, and indeed types of infrastructure may be different for different parts of the network depending upon the opportunities, constraints and types of user the routes need to accommodate. As routes progress through concept and detailed design this may necessitate change, but the plan provides a starting point for these processes.
- 1.3 The scope of the plan is limited to Taunton Garden Town and the connections most relevant to connecting the Garden Communities with modern, futureproofed walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure. However, it is important to recognise that the Garden Town does not sit in isolation. Whilst most of the external day to day services and facilities that people living on the Garden Communities may need to access are likely to be located within Taunton, the Garden Communities may themselves provide key services to surrounding areas, and often provide important opportunities for improving links between the town and other communities in the rural hinterland. The "Garden Communities" considered by the plan are the Comeytrove, Ford Farm, Monkton Heathfield, Nerrols and Staplegrove urban extensions, plus the major town centre regeneration site of Firepool, and the Nexus25 strategic employment site (as shown in figure 1, below).

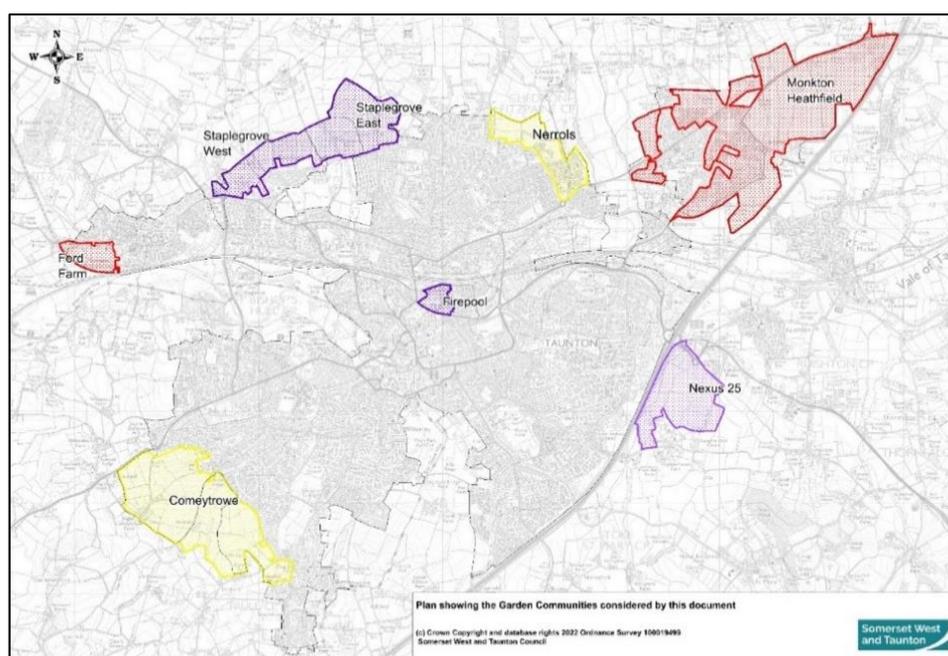


Figure 1 The Garden Communities considered by "Connecting our Garden Communities".

1.4 The plan broadly follows the Government’s LCWIP Technical Guidance for Local Authorities, and proposes a network of routes connecting across the town, as identified in the Network Plan (see figure 2, below).

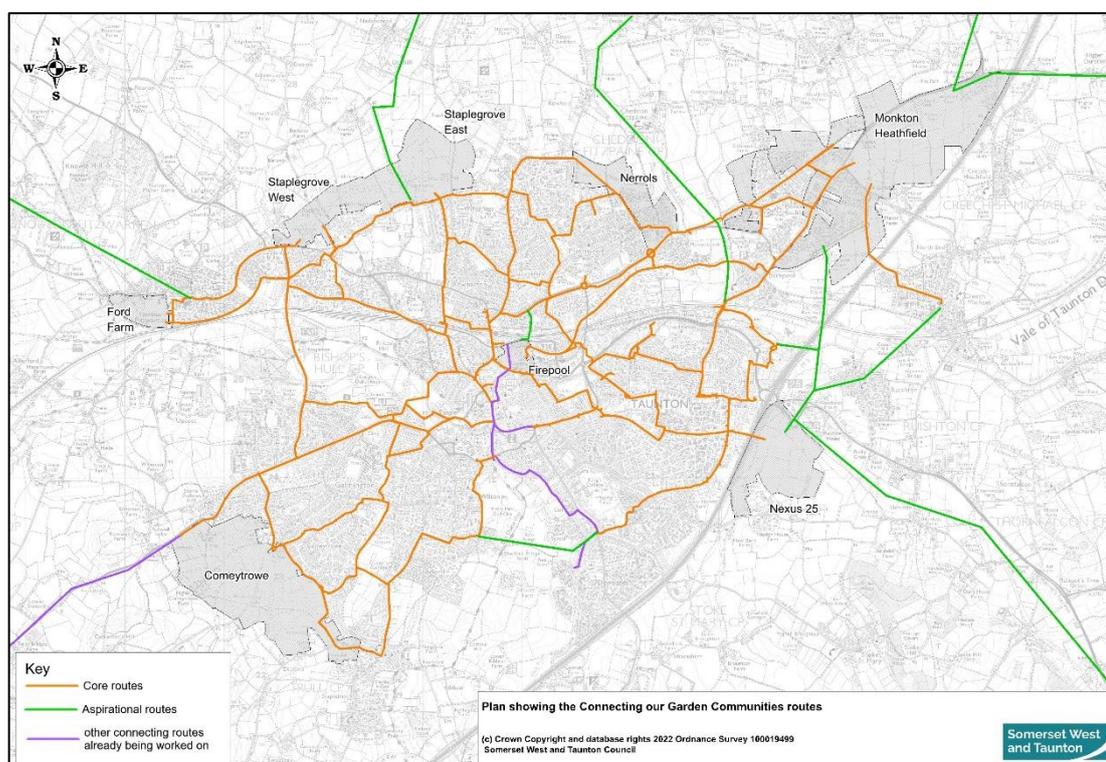


Figure 2 Connecting our Garden Communities Network Plan

- 1.5 The plan responds to national and local planning and other policies and contexts. In particular, the plan explains and justifies how the provision of walking, wheeling and cycling connections and infrastructure relate to specific adopted planning policies and approved developments where appropriate.
- 1.6 The plan prioritises routes using a matrix approach, scoring against a set of criteria, and balanced with scheme costs and opportunities for securing funding/delivery.
- 1.7 The plan sets out an approach for delivery, embedding the plan, taking on board wider considerations, next steps on route design, securing funding and arrangements for review.
- 1.8 The plan will be adopted as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. This will primarily apply to planning applications relating to the Garden Communities. However, there may be other relevant planning applications along the routes or nearby which will also need to respond.
- 1.9 The purpose of this Report is to determine whether Connecting our Garden Communities should be subject to:
 - a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in accordance with European Directive 2001/42/EC (SEA Directive) and associated Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA Regulations); or

- a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) in accordance with Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive and with Regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

1.10 Under the above pieces of legislation, an SEA is required for all plans which are likely to have significant environmental effects; and an HRA is required when it is likely that the implementation of the plan is likely to have a significant effect upon protected European Sites.

1.11 A draft SEA/HRA Screening Report was produced and subject to consultation with the three statutory bodies designated in regulations (Historic England, Environment Agency and Natural England) alongside consultation on the draft Connecting our Garden Communities Plan between 27 July 2022 and 30 September 2022. The comments received as part of this consultation have informed the conclusions of this final report.

1.12 **The conclusion of the assessment is that full SEA and HRA are not required to be conducted.**

2. SEA Screening

- 2.1 The basis for Strategic Environmental Assessments legislation is European Directive 2001/42/EC (SEA Directive), transposed into English law by the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA Regulations). Detailed guidance on these regulations can be found in the Government publication ‘A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive’ (ODPM 2005).
- 2.2 The objective of SEA is *“to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of development plans.... with a view to promoting sustainable development”* EU Directive 2001/42/EC (Article 1).
- 2.3 Under Article 2(a) of the SEA Directive, a plan or programme requires an SEA to be conducted where they are:
- *“subject to preparation and/or adoption by an authority at national, regional or local level or which are prepared by an authority for adoption, through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government, and*
 - *required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions.”*
- According to the ODPM guidance, “administrative provisions” are *“likely to be that they are publicly available, prepared in a formal way, probably involving consultation with interested parties. The administrative provision must have sufficient formality such that it counts as a “provision” and it must also use language that plainly requires rather than just encourages a plan or programme to be prepared”*.
- 2.4 The national Planning Practice Guidance states that *“In exceptional circumstances a Strategic Environmental Assessment may be required when producing a Supplementary Planning Document”* (Paragraph: 008 Reference ID: 61-008-20190315). The Connecting our Garden Communities plan is not intended to be adopted as SPD. However, other plans and projects may still require SEA, the Council is legally obliged to advise on whether it is their opinion that an SEA is required or not.
- 2.5 In order to determine whether or not an SEA is required, a “screening” exercise has been undertaken by the Council. The screening evaluates the contents of Connecting our Garden Communities against the criteria set out in the SEA Directive. These criteria are presented over the page in Figure 3.
- 2.6 Should the screening conclude that the Connecting our Garden Communities plan is applicable and will have a “significant impact on the environment”, then a full SEA will be required. Should the conclusion be that an SEA is not required, then any future significant variations or additions to the plan will need to be subject to further screening.

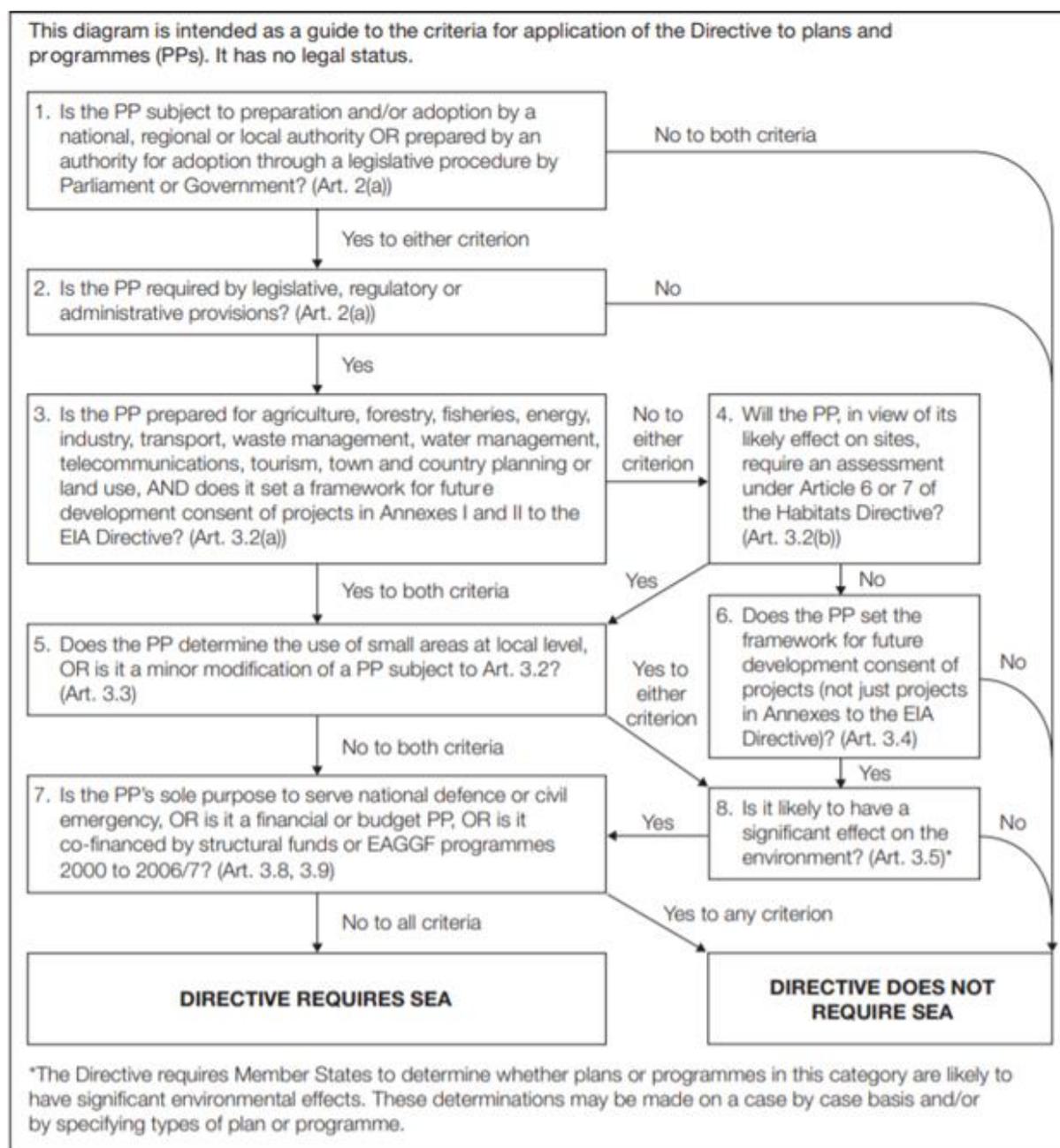


Figure 3 Application of the SEA Directive to plans and programmes

Connecting our Garden Communities

2.7 The Connecting our Garden Communities plan has been produced as a means of responding to the following objectives:

- Develop a network plan identifying key active travel routes linking the Garden Communities into the LCWIP strategic routes and key destinations in order to enable significant modal shift.
- Ensure infrastructure proposed will provide modern and futureproofed cycle and pedestrian routes.
- Ensure routes are informed by key community and technical stakeholder engagement to maximise support and chances of delivery.
- Provide an evidence base to support developer negotiations, funding bids and further work.

- 2.8 The Plan follows the methodology set out in the Government’s LCWIP Guidance to determine its scope, gather information, audit options, network plan, prioritise and integrate the plan with others to secure successful implementation.
- 2.9 The Plan sets out the local and national policy context within which it is being developed. Of particular importance, the plan is pursuant to a number of existing policies and strategies including:
- Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (2008)
 - Taunton Deane Green Infrastructure Strategy (2009)
 - Taunton Deane Core Strategy (2012)
 - Taunton Deane Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (2016)
 - Taunton Deane Green Infrastructure Opportunities Update (2017)
 - Taunton Garden Town Vision (2018)
 - Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy (2020)
 - Somerset West and Taunton Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience (CNCR) Action Plan (2020)
 - Taunton Garden Town Public Realm Design Guide SPD (2021)
 - Somerset West and Taunton Districtwide Design Guide SPD (2021) and
 - Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) (2021).

The above adopted or approved plans and strategies, and the policies, actions and aspirations within them set the overarching strategy which this Plan responds to, and through which it may be possible to implement it. Connecting our Garden Communities does not seek to alter existing or set new policy, and it does not allocate land in any way. It responds to existing policy and provides aspiration for how policy implementation may be achieved.

- 2.10 The plan sets out the Council’s aspirations for a connected network of walking, wheeling and cycling routes which not only meet the needs of the people living on, working in and visiting these new developments, but also existing communities both within and adjoining Taunton. It focuses on identification of the routes themselves. The routes are not allocated and may change as more detailed work is undertaken. The plan includes comments in the route summaries about considerations to be taken into account in route design as well as an indicative hierarchy of walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure interventions for different parts of the network . However, it does not go as far as determining exactly what level of infrastructure will be delivered along every section of each route. Further work is required to take each route and specific interventions within them forward through concept and detailed design stages. If the proposals change significantly, there may be a need to re-visit this Screening.
- 2.11 The Plan broadly covers the urban area of Taunton and its immediate rural hinterland explained in the scoping section.
- 2.12 The intention is that the Plan will be adopted as a Council document and become a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications. This means that it will carry weight in the decision-making process, although it will not in itself be part of the adopted development plan. It includes no policies and does not allocate any land for development. Planning applications should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Provided regard is had to all material considerations, it is for the decision

maker to decide what weight is to be given to the material considerations in each case. The plan clarifies that adopted development plan policy is the starting point for decision-making, though this Plan will be an important and up to date material consideration for relevant applications to respond to.

The SEA Screening Assessment

2.13 Table 1, below contains the criteria from Figure 1, above. It identifies whether the Council considers the answer to each criterion to be Yes or No, and gives the reason for this conclusion.

Table 1 – SEA Screening assessment following the process identified in Figure 1

Stage	Y/N	Reason
1. Is the Plan or Programme (PP) subject to preparation and/or adoption by a national, regional or local authority OR prepared by an authority for adoption through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government? (Art. 2(a))	Y	The Plan has been prepared and is intended to be adopted/approved by Somerset West and Taunton Council as a material consideration. There is no legislative procedure covering the adoption/approval of material considerations.
2. Is the PP required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions? (Art. 2(a))	Y	The Plan is not formally <i>required</i> by any legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions. Existing adopted planning policies refer to delivery of walking and cycling improvements and a cycle network. However, these policies do not require the development of a plan such as Connecting our Garden Communities. Due to changed circumstances (including adoption of the Garden Town Vision, declaration of a Climate Emergency, and approval of the Taunton LCWIP, the LPA is of the view that it requires an up to date, evidence-based plan for a network of cycling routes to inform implementation of these policies in the determination of relevant planning applications, and to boost the chances of successful negotiation with developers. The Plan will be publicly available and has been consulted on in line with the Council’s Statement of Community Involvement, likely amounting to “administrative provisions”.
3. Is the PP prepared for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications, tourism, town and country planning or land use, AND does it set a framework for	N	The Plan has been prepared for the purposes of town and country planning and informing consideration of relevant development proposals. Relevant development proposals may include some of the projects referred to in Annex II of the EIA Directive (e.g. the Garden

<p>future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive? (Art 3.2(a))</p>		<p>Communities likely constitute urban development projects). However, the plan relates primarily to how these developments connect with existing communities, externally.</p> <p>The Plan does not set a framework for future development consent of such projects as this is already set by the existing adopted local plans covering the Taunton area of the SWT district. The Plan simply sets out aspirations for a connected network of walking, wheeling and cycling routes, and in doing so it responds to existing policy and provides aspiration for how policy implementation may be achieved.</p>
<p>4. Will the PP, in view of its likely effect on sites, require an assessment under Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive? (Art. 3.2(b))</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>See section 3 of this Screening Report in relation to HRA Screening.</p>
<p>6. Does the PP set the framework for future development consent of projects (not just projects in Annexes to the EIA Directive)? (Art. 3.4)</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>The Plan relates to walking, wheeling and cycling routes, which in most cases will necessitate improvements within highways boundaries. Section 55(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 does not consider works by the Highways Authority required for the maintenance or improvement of the road within highways boundaries to constitute development, unless any works not exclusively for the maintenance of the road may have significant adverse effects on the environment. Therefore, where any projects arising from/responding to the Plan are located within the highways boundary and they are not anticipated to have a significant adverse effect on the environment, then the framework for their consent has already been established from a planning perspective and this is reflected in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, Part 9, Class A.</p> <p>Development of walking and cycling infrastructure either within the highways boundary and which may have significant adverse effects on the environment, or outside of the highways boundary may</p>

		constitute development and require planning permission. However, in these circumstances, the Plan does not set the framework for future development consent of projects as this is already set by the existing adopted local plans covering the SWT district. The Plan simply sets out aspirations for a connected network of walking and cycling routes, and in doing so it responds to existing policy and provides aspiration for how policy implementation may be achieved.
7. Is it likely to have a significant effect on the environment? (Art. 3.5)	N	See screening assessment for environmental effects in Table 2 of this report, below.

2.14 Criterion 8 requires an assessment of whether the Plan is likely to have a significant effect on the environment in reference to Article 3.5 of the SEA Directive and Regulation 9(1) of the SEA Regulations. Schedule 1, Annex II of the SEA Regulations contains the criteria for determining the likely significance of effects on the environment. Table 3, below contains the criteria from Schedule 1 Annex II of the SEA Regulations and an assessment of whether the Plan would likely have a significant environmental effect or not.

Table 3 – Environmental impact screening assessment

Criteria for determining the likely significance of effects (Schedule 1 of SEA regulations)	Is the PP likely to have a significant environmental effect?	Justification for Screening Assessment
The characteristics of plans and programmes:		
a) the degree to which the PP sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources;	N	<p>The Plan will not technically set a framework for decisions to be made against. However, it is intended to influence relevant planning decisions (see response to Q3 in Table 1).</p> <p>The Plan identifies broadly the locations for a network of walking and cycling routes. It is as specific as suggesting which streets routes may be accommodated within, but not so specific as to what the design of these routes may be. For instance, the Plan identifies the various barriers and opportunities along the routes identified, and hints at what may be necessary in the way of infrastructure but stops short of requiring this or committing to this in any way. Therefore, the design of the infrastructure to be accommodated on any of the identified routes is for future project level consideration. In some cases, this</p>

	<p>may necessitate more significant infrastructure delivery, in others it may necessitate no changes, or only minor improvements (e.g. signage). However, this detail is not set out by the Plan.</p> <p>Furthermore, whilst the plan identifies routes, the exact location and alignments may change as they progress through the design process.</p> <p>The Plan identifies some routes more specifically than others. The “core” routes are clearly aligned to specific streets, whilst the “aspirational, green infrastructure-led” routes are far more indicative, being straighter line connections suggesting broadly the locations to be connected.</p> <p>Locational considerations will be relevant to whether resulting infrastructure development and use will have significant environmental effects or not. A number of routes pass nearby and in some cases through areas of sensitivity to environmental impact (e.g. Conservation Areas, flood zones, Local Wildlife Sites, Local Nature Reserves, Special Area of Conservation consultation areas etc.).</p> <p>However, in the vast majority of cases for the “core” routes, they are located within the existing urban area, contain an element of highways infrastructure already, and they are already used by pedestrians and cyclists. Therefore, location is less likely to be a key determinant of whether significant environmental effects may arise for these routes – where the specifics of the infrastructure design are far more likely to be the determinant of any potential effects. The Plan does not set out the detail of infrastructure design, which will need to be considered at a project level.</p> <p>For the “aspirational” routes, these tend to be located in places where existing highways infrastructure either does not exist or where projects may need to consider more ambitious new infrastructure. In these cases, location potentially could play a key determining role on whether significant environmental effects may arise for these routes, but again the detail of infrastructure design will be key. The Plan is deliberately less specific about the location of these “aspirational” routes, reflecting their more sensitive nature, and refers to them as being “green infrastructure-led” which suggests that they may have a different design focus to the more urban “core” routes. However, the Plan does not set out the exact location or detail of</p>
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		<p>infrastructure design, which will need to be considered at a project level.</p> <p>The Plan sets out the journeys and user groups that each route is intended to serve, which may influence the nature, size and operation conditions of the routes and the type of infrastructure which may be needed. It also states an intention for infrastructure to aim for compliance with the Government’s Local Transport Note (LTN) 1/20 guidance on cycle infrastructure design wherever possible. However, it does not set out the detailed infrastructure design necessary and clearly states that infrastructure design will need to respond to its specific circumstances as it progresses through the design process at a project level. The Plan therefore allows for a flexible and locationally appropriate approach to be taken and does not seek to set a framework.</p>
<p>b) the degree to which the PP influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy;</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>The Plan will influence the development of the project-level proposals, which may potentially need to be subject to project level EIA (depending on the scale and nature of proposals). It may also influence future policy development (e.g. for future Local Plan, Local Transport Plan and iterations of the Taunton LCWIP). However, new development plan policy will, once prepared and adopted be part of the development plan, hold statutory weight and as such sit above the Plan in a hierarchy and will be subject to its own Assessment. In this way, the Masterplan is intended to influence the production of other plans and programmes.</p> <p>However, it is considered that the degree of influence of the Plan is limited in this regard and subsequent project level EIA and plan level SA/SEA processes will address any concerns.</p>
<p>c) the relevance of the PP for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development;</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>The Plan is intended to help ensure new developments come forward with the necessary walking, wheeling and cycling links to enable sustainable development. This will result in environmental (e.g. climate impact), social (e.g. health and wellbeing improvement) and economic (e.g. local service vitality and viability) benefits to the area.</p> <p>The integration of a wide range of social, economic and environmental factors has already been assessed and achieved via the existing adopted development plans. The relevance and influence of the Plan will be balanced in decision making alongside all relevant policies of the development plan and other material considerations with a view to promoting sustainable development in the round. Therefore, the Plan has</p>

		<p>relevance to the integration of environmental considerations as part of promoting sustainable development. However, the effects of the Plan in this regard are unlikely to be significant as the balance of different social, economic and environmental factors is already determined at a strategic level by the adopted development plan, with environmental considerations integral to what constitutes sustainable development and identified by requirements in policies such as CP8 of the Core Strategy.</p>
<p>d) environmental problems relevant to the PP;</p>	<p>Y</p>	<p>There are a number of environmental constraints in and nearby Taunton including Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, flood zones, Air Quality Management Areas; Local Wildlife Sites, Local Nature Reserves and Special Area of Conservation and their consultation areas, and protected landscapes such as the Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills AONBs. Development within or nearby these constraints may result in environmental problems if not appropriately addressed/mitigated. Such environmental problems which may occur without appropriate mitigation may include: impacts upon designated and non-designated heritage assets; increased flood risk; air quality impacts; landscape, townscape and visual impacts; ecological impacts.</p> <p>Adherence to the Plan's intention to deliver on the wide range of health, environmental, economic, safety and social co-benefits identified on page 22 of the Plan, should reduce the likelihood of environmental problems occurring from new developments, and from the delivery of the routes identified.</p> <p>However, some of the routes identified have higher potential to result in environmental problems without appropriate mitigations. For instance, a number of identified routes pass nearby and in some cases through areas of sensitivity to environmental impact (e.g. Conservation Areas, flood zones, Local Wildlife Sites, Local Nature Reserves, Special Area of Conservation consultation areas etc.). In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routes 1, 21 and 22 run through the Staplegrove Conservation Area. • Routes 1 and 25 run through the Taunton: Staplegrove Road Conservation Area. • Route 5 runs through the Taunton: Park Street and Wellington Road and Taunton: Castle Green/Bath Place Conservation Areas. • Routes 6 and 28 run through the Trull Conservation Area. • Route 9 runs through the Trull Road, Fons George and Mount St / Vivary Park Conservation Areas.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Route 34 may run through/near the Cheddon Fitzpaine and Hestercombe Conservation Areas, though the exact routing is not determined. • A number of routes will run nearby Listed Buildings. • The majority of routes interact with floodzone 2/3 at some point. • Routes 5, 5a and 19 run along the Galmington Stream, Mill Stream and Blackbrook respectively, each of which are associated with the South Taunton Streams Local Nature Reserve. • Routes 22 and 25 border the Silk Mills Local Nature Reserve. • Route 5 runs along and Route 6 crosses the Galmington Stream Local Wildlife Site. • Routes 1, 9, 10, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 29, 35, 36 and 37 run along or cross the River Tone and Tributaries Local Wildlife Site. • Routes 10, 13, 14, 19, 34, 35 and 36 run along or cross the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal Local Wildlife Site. • Routes 2, 11, 13, 14, 34 and 38 border or overlap with the Hestercombe House SAC band B consultation zone. Route 34 may potentially be relevant to band A, though the exact routing is not determined. • Routes 33, 34 and 38 have the potential to involve routes within or nearby the Quantock Hills AONB. • Route 41 as a potential new bridge has the highest likelihood of potential for landscape, townscape and visual impact due to the height of any structure that may be required. <p>As previously stated, the Plan identifies routes but does not set out the design of those routes or the infrastructure to be accommodated. The identification of a route does not in itself result in an environmental problem. However, unless an appropriate design approach is taken, there could potentially arise problems e.g. through inappropriate lighting impacting on biodiversity, or raising of levels/installation of impermeable surfaces within the floodplain. However, the Plan does not set out the detailed design of the infrastructure to be accommodated, which will need to be considered at the project level.</p> <p>Where infrastructure delivery constitutes development, a planning application would be required and adopted planning policies would restrict inappropriate development accordingly. Furthermore, other permitting schemes such as with the Environment</p>
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		<p>Agency would protect against inappropriate development from taking place.</p> <p>As a result of all of the above, it is not expected that the Plan will lead to significant environmental effects in relation to the above potential environmental problems.</p>
<p>e) the relevance of the PP for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (for example, plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection).</p>	N	<p>The Plan holds no direct relevance to the implementation of Community legislation on the environment. The Plan identifies routes only and does not set the detailed design for infrastructure.</p> <p>However, development proposals related to the routes may need to satisfy the requirements of Community legislation in relation to waste management and water protection (e.g. the Water Framework Directive).</p> <p>Water courses may be particularly susceptible to pollution and contamination both during construction and once in use. Pollution and contamination of these water bodies could present significant environmental effects both locally and further downstream. The River Tone and its tributaries run through and have a high degree of impact on the Somerset Levels and Moors Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar European Sites. Where routes require development in close proximity to watercourses, the design process will need to consider this and how adverse impacts can be avoided or mitigated as necessary.</p> <p>Any development proposals relating to the routes will need to consider effective and sustainable drainage as part of the design process. A WFD screening assessment and potentially detailed assessment may be required at the project stage.</p> <p>Existing planning policy deals with the above concerns and planning applications would need to show how they respond to these policies and the WFD. As a result of all of the above, it is not expected that the Plan will lead to significant environmental effects in this regard.</p>
<p>Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected:</p>		
<p>a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects;</p>	N	<p>The Plan sets out an aspiration for a connected network of walking, wheeling and cycling routes. There is no guarantee that these routes will come forwards, or that the routes will be on exactly the same alignment with them, though it is intended that the Plan influences the routings and future design. As set out above, the Plan is not considered to give rise to any environmental problems in itself as any potential impacts are likely to be associated with detailed design, and that this will be understood at a project level. The probability of effects as referred to in</p>

		<p>the above sections varies. At this stage, the probability of any potential effects in relation to identified potential environmental problems are uncertain as they relate to detailed design and not to the identification of a route in the Plan.</p> <p>Some potential environmental effects will be short-lived and temporary (e.g. if related to construction activity). However, any potential effects as a result of the design of the infrastructure may be longer term or permanent in effect. However, any potential effects relate to detailed design and not to the identification of a route in the Plan.</p>
b) the cumulative nature of the effects;	N	<p>Multiple developments in and around Taunton will result in cumulative effects upon biodiversity, the transport network, landscape, historic environment, air quality and carbon emissions amongst others. Successful delivery of the routes identified in the Plan may help to reduce the effects of other developments on issues such as transport network and air quality. However, cumulative impacts of development on other aspects like landscape, historic environment and biodiversity could potentially be more negative. However, route identification is not the main determinant, which is more likely to be detailed design.</p>
c) the transboundary nature of the effects;	N	<p>There would be no transboundary effects.</p>
d) the risks to human health or the environment (for example, due to accidents);	N	<p>Successful delivery of the routes identified in the Plan may help to address significant risks to human health (e.g. from physical inactivity, respiratory conditions, road safety etc.). Route identification and connections identified within the Plan are relevant here from a positive aspect. However, detailed design will be the key determinant on these effects. Well designed and locationally appropriate infrastructure may result in positive effects (e.g. resulting in improved road safety), whilst poorly designed and locationally inappropriate infrastructure could result in negative effects (e.g. causing more road safety risks). There are potential environmental effects arising from development proposals relating to the routes which may pose a risk to human health or the environment if not effectively mitigated (e.g. in relation to light pollution). Some of these may be a particular risk during site preparation and construction, others related to the ongoing use of the infrastructure. However, the Plan relates to route identification and not to detailed design of infrastructure. More detailed consideration of these issues and mitigations is not</p>

		possible until the project stage. Therefore, the Plan itself is not considered likely to give rise to significant environmental effects in this regard.
e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);	N	<p>The Plan broadly covers the area of Taunton and its surrounding rural hinterland. However, the routes themselves cover corridors across the town and into the rural hinterland. Any potential effects arising are likely to be relatively contained and limited to the immediate areas surrounding these routes.</p> <p>The town of Taunton has a population of around 70,000, a significant proportion of which will have some relationship with points along one or more routes identified (either visually, through movements, or otherwise). The design of these routes will have a key influence on the future experience of the town movement network and town centre in particular, which is used by the majority of the population of the town as well as people from outside the area.</p> <p>Generally, the intended effects are likely to be positive and unlikely to be significant in relation to these populations. However, the plan considers only the routes themselves and not detailed design of infrastructure which will be the key determinant. Therefore, the Plan itself is not considered likely to give rise to significant environmental effects in this regard.</p>
f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to – i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage; ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or iii) intensive land-use; and	N	<p>The district of Somerset West and Taunton has a number of special natural, cultural and heritage characteristics which are specific to the district or wider area, including a relatively high concentration of historical assets within Taunton itself including Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Some of the routes identified have higher potential to result in environmental problems in relation to these assets without appropriate mitigations. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routes 1, 21 and 22 run through the Staplegrove Conservation Area. • Routes 1 and 25 run through the Taunton: Staplegrove Road Conservation Area. • Route 5 runs through the Taunton: Park Street and Wellington Road and Taunton: Castle Green/Bath Place Conservation Areas. • Routes 6 and 28 run through the Trull Conservation Area. • Route 9 runs through the Trull Road, Fons George and Mount St / Vivary Park Conservation Areas. • Route 34 may run through/near the Cheddon Fitzpaine and Hestercombe Conservation Areas, though the exact routing is not determined.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of routes will run nearby Listed Buildings. <p>These areas are considered to be of high value for their natural characteristics or cultural heritage and are sensitive to change to varying degrees. Generally, these assets are likely to have limited vulnerability to significant environmental effects from the development of walking and cycling infrastructure, particularly as the Plan has a clear focus on the placemaking benefits of such infrastructure, and where such infrastructure is replacing/improving existing highways infrastructure. However, the key determinant is route design, and the Plan does not set out the detail in this respect.</p> <p>Taunton is located in a vale between the Quantock Hills AONB and Blackdown Hills AONB, which provide an important backdrop to the town’s landscape context. Some of the routes identified have higher potential to result in environmental problems in relation to these assets without appropriate mitigations. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routes 33, 34 and 38 have the potential to involve routes within or nearby the Quantock Hills AONB. • Route 41 as a potential new bridge has the highest likelihood of potential for landscape, townscape and visual impact due to the height of any structure that may be required. <p>Taunton contains and lies in close proximity to a number of ecological designations and sites including the Hestercombe House Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and Local Nature Reserves (LNRs). Some of the routes identified have higher potential to result in environmental problems in relation to these assets without appropriate mitigations. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routes 5, 5a and 19 run along the Galmington Stream, Mill Stream and Blackbrook respectively, each of which are associated with the South Taunton Streams LNR. • Routes 22 and 25 border the Silk Mills LNR. • Route 5 runs along and Route 6 crosses the Galmington Stream LWS. • Routes 1, 9, 10, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 29, 35, 36 and 37 run along or cross the River Tone and Tributaries LWS. • Routes 10, 13, 14, 19, 34, 35 and 36 run along or cross the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal LWS. • Routes 2, 11, 13, 14, 34 and 38 border or overlap with the Hestercombe House SAC band B consultation zone. Route 34 may potentially be
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		<p>relevant to band A, though the exact routing is not determined by the Plan.</p> <p>Taunton is crossed by the River Tone and a number of tributary watercourses as well as the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. As such, the majority of routes interact with floodzone 2/3 at some point.</p> <p>The East Reach Air Quality Management Area is located within Taunton. Route 20 passes through this area and has the potential to (subject to design) help address the cause of poor air quality in this area. More generally, improved air quality is identified by the Plan as a key co-benefit of action.</p> <p>The Plan identifies routes across the town which have a locational relationship with the above factors. However, of itself this has no significant effects. The key determinant of the effects of the routes is in the detailed design of infrastructure.</p>
<p>g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status.</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>As set out above, there are a number of assets with national (e.g. Conservation Areas) and Community (e.g. Hestercombe House SAC) protection status. The Plan however, only identifies routes, from which no effects are directly resultant. The key determinant for any effects is the detailed design of infrastructure which is beyond the scope of the Plan and needs to be understood at the project level.</p>

SEA Screening Conclusion

2.15 It is the opinion of the Council that the Connecting our Garden Communities Plan does not require Strategic Environmental Assessment in accordance with Part 3 of the SEA Regulations. However, it is important that as routes progress through the design process and relevant individual development proposals are developed, they are subject to project level Environmental Assessment as appropriate, in order to understand whether significant effects may arise.

3. HRA Screening

- 3.1 The basis for Habitat Regulations Assessment legislation is the European Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC (Habitats Directive), transposed into English law by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (Habitat Regulations).
- 3.2 The Habitats Directive and Regulations afford protection to plants, animals and habitats that are rare and vulnerable in a European context. Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) is a systematic process through which plans or projects are assessed for likely impact on the integrity of European Sites. European Sites, (also referred to as Natura 2000 sites), consist of Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC); Potential Special Protection Areas and candidate Special Areas of Conservation (pSPA and cSAC); and listed or proposed Ramsar sites.
- 3.3 There are seven Natura 2000 sites within the Somerset West and Taunton district, as set out in Table 3 below:

Table 3 – European Sites / Natura 2000 sites within Somerset West and Taunton district.

European Sites / Natura 2000 sites
Exmoor and Quantock Oak Woodlands SAC
Hestercombe House SAC
Holme and Clean Moor SAC
Quants SAC
Severn Estuary SPA/SAC/Ramsar
Somerset Levels and Moors SPA/Ramsar
Exmoor Heaths SAC

- 3.4 Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive states that:
“Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site’s conservation objectives”.
- 3.5 Under the Habitat Regulations, the Council is considered to be a “competent authority”. Regulation 63(1) of the Habitat Regulations states that:
“A competent authority, before deciding to undertake, or give any consent, permission or other authorisation for, a plan or project which –
a) is likely to have a significant effect on a European site or a European offshore marine site (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects), and
b) is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of that site,
must make an appropriate assessment of the implications of the plan or project for that site in view of that site’s conservation objectives.”
- 3.6 The first stage of the HRA process is to establish whether a “significant effect” is likely. This is referred to as screening. If the screening assessment concludes that a significant effect is not likely then no further action is required. If the screening assessment identifies potential effects and deems them to be significant, then further “Appropriate Assessment” is required.

- 3.7 The Plan, once adopted, would carry weight as a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications. As such, it is considered that Connecting our Garden Communities is a ‘plan’ for the purposes of Regulation 63 and must be subject to HRA screening.
- 3.8 In order to establish whether the Plan is likely to have any significant effects upon the European Sites, this Screening assessment considers the Plan in relation to four steps based around the Screening methodology set out in the Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC (European Commission 2001) as set out in Table 4, below.

Table 4 – Screening steps and responses

Question	Y/N	Reason
1. Is the PP directly connected with, or necessary to the management of a European site for nature conservation?	N	The Plan is not directly connected with and does not influence or set policy necessary to the management of any European Site.
2. Are there any other PPs that could in combination with this PP have potential to have significant effects upon a European Site?	N	<p>The Plan pertains to the identification of walking, wheeling and cycling routes across Taunton.</p> <p>Individual projects arising from this Plan could, <i>in theory</i>, have potential to have significant effects upon the Hestercombe House SAC if not appropriately designed with avoidance and mitigation in mind, either alone, in combination with one another, or in combination with other proposals. The Hestercombe House SAC is designated in recognition of its population of Lesser Horseshoe Bats.</p> <p>The development plan has previously been subject to Appropriate Assessment. As a result of this, the adopted plans include policies and mitigations to ensure that significant effects do not arise in relation to the European Sites (Policy CP8 of the Core Strategy). Where projects for delivery of the routes identified by this plan come forward requiring planning permission then development plan policy would restrict their design and construction accordingly.</p> <p>However, this Plan considers only the routes themselves and not detailed design of infrastructure which will be the key determinant. Therefore, the Plan itself is not considered likely to give rise to significant effects in this regard.</p>
3. Are there likely to be any potential effects upon the identified European Site(s)?	N	The most likely sources of any potential effects from the delivery of walking, wheeling and cycling routes may be in relation to either the introduction of inappropriate lighting or removal of vegetation. The Plan does not explicitly require either of these things as it considers

		<p>only route identification and no detailed design of infrastructure.</p> <p>Most routes identified are located /expected to be accommodated within highway land and as such will already benefit from a level of lighting and will not require removal of significant vegetation.</p> <p>However, some routes identified relate to darker, more ecologically sensitive corridors including along rivers, streams and the canal, which may present increased likelihood of relevance to bats. Furthermore, the Plan identifies a number of “aspirational” routes which link between Taunton and rural areas, including routes 33, 34 and 38 which indicatively link through land within the consultation zone B for the Hestercombe House SAC, with route 34 in particular routing through both consultation zone B and A and to Hestercombe House itself. But, the identification of a route is not in itself likely to lead to potential effects upon the European Sites. The key determinant is the detailed design of these routes, which is beyond the scope of the Plan.</p> <p>Detailed design will need to take account of various factors including impacts upon the European Sites and ensure that proposals are appropriate to their circumstances. Project level assessment may be required where location and specific proposals suggest that significant effect may arise.</p>
<p>4. What is the significance of the effects upon the identified European Site(s)?</p>	<p>N</p>	<p>The delivery of walking, wheeling and cycling routes broadly aligned to those identified by the Plan will not in themselves result in significant effects upon the Hestercombe SAC. It is the design of the respective infrastructure which may result in effects. If identified routes through more sensitive corridors were to be accompanied by insensitive lighting and or removal of important commuting structures in the way of vegetation, then this would likely constitute a significant effect. However, at this stage, the plan simply identifies routes (and in the case of those closest to the SAC, simply reiterates existing aspirations for routes through indicative lines). Therefore, the Plan itself is not considered likely to give rise to significant effects in this regard.</p>

HRA Screening Conclusion

- 3.9 It is the opinion of the Council that the Connecting our Garden Communities Plan does not require Appropriate Assessment under HRA legislation. However, it is important that as routes progress through the design process and relevant individual projects are developed, they are screened so that it can be understood whether significant effects may arise.**