

Draft Firepool Masterplan

Consultation Statement

November 2022

Version	Purpose	Date
1	For Corporate Scrutiny Committee	21/10/2022

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Introduction

Firepool is a major regeneration area within Taunton town centre, for which there have been development aspirations for many years. The adopted Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP, adopted 2008) allocates the site for development. There have been various proposals for development of the site, including Outline Planning Permission being granted for a retail-led scheme in 2019 (permission now expired). However, circumstances have changed and the Council itself is now taking a more proactive role in the development of the site, taking it forward and investing in the future of the town centre. The Council has two distinct roles in relation to the site: as developer / landowner / asset holder; and as Local Planning Authority. In this context, the Council has produced a Draft Firepool Masterplan in order to:

- a) provide the Council as Local Planning Authority – with an up to date, evidenced and justified planning policy context for regard to be had to as a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications, and
- b) provide the Council as developer / landowner / asset holder – with greater certainty about what might constitute appropriate development proposals for the site going forward.

The Draft Masterplan has been produced by the Council's Firepool team and their consultants in the Council's role as developer. This follows consultation and engagement with key internal and external technical stakeholders and review by the Quality Review Panel. Officers of the Local Planning Authority have been engaged along the way and are now recommending that the Draft Masterplan is approved for public consultation.

Following the consultation period, comments will be reviewed and amendments made as considered necessary taking account of views received and work on the issues identified as being outstanding within this report. 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

This Consultation Report explains how the Council is undertaking public consultation to inform the development of the Masterplan. The report covers:

- Which bodies and persons are being invited to make comments;
- How those bodies and persons are being invited to make comment;
- The material that is subject to consultation; and
- A summary of the developer-led consultation undertaken previously.

The Council has an adopted [Statement of Community Involvement](#) (SCI). The SCI outlines that the Council is committed to effective community engagement, and seeks to use a wide range of methods for involving the community in the plan making process. SWT's Statement of Community Involvement was adopted in November 2019. In relation to plan preparation, it primarily relates to the preparation of Development Plan Documents (DPDs), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Sustainability Appraisal (SA), Supplementary Planning Documents

(SPDs) and Neighbourhood Plans. As the Masterplan is not intended to be a DPD or SPD and is therefore not formally required by any legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions, there are no mandatory steps, methods or bodies for consultation to comply with. However, the Draft Masterplan consultation has been designed to comply with the SCI in the interests of good practice.

The Draft Masterplan is supported by a Draft SEA Environmental Report and Draft Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) Appropriate Assessment which do have specific consultation requirements. The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 set out consultation procedures for SEA Environmental Reports in Regulation 13. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 set out consultation procedures for HRA Appropriate Assessment of plans in Regulation 105. This consultation has been designed to comply with the requirements of these regulations.

Consultation Summary

Consultation on the Draft Firepool Masterplan will take place from 21st November 2022 through to 2nd January 2023 (six weeks).

The documents available to comment on as part of this consultation include the following:

- Draft Firepool Masterplan,
- Non-Technical Summary document,
- Draft SEA Environmental Report,
- Draft HRA Appropriate Assessment,
- Equalities Impact Assessment,
- Consultation Statement (this document).

The Draft Masterplan is also supported by the following background evidence documents, though comments are not explicitly being sought on these:

- Heritage Assessment,
- TVIA,
- Parking Strategy,
- Cycle Assessment,
- Nutrient Neutrality Assessment and Mitigation Strategy,
- Office and Retail Market Update,
- Ecology Survey,
- Viability Appraisal,

The Draft Masterplan itself is a 199 page long PDF document. The SEA Environmental Report and HRA Appropriate Assessment as well as supporting evidence documents are also long and detailed documents. By their nature, these documents include a lot of technical information, though diagrams, maps, illustrations and photographs have been used and jargon avoided as much as possible in order to make it as accessible as possible considering their nature and purpose. The Draft Masterplan document summarises the supporting evidence in a more accessible way, however it remains necessarily a long document. As such, a

Non-Technical Summary document has been produced to help present the most key points in a short (xx page) accessible way.

Purpose of the consultation

The Draft Masterplan provides guidance on how development may come forward on the site considering the changes in circumstances which have occurred since the relevant policies of the development plan were adopted. It illustrates the aspirations of the Council with regards to the site, which in places go beyond or are otherwise different to the requirements set out by adopted planning policies. In doing so, the Masterplan does not seek to alter existing or set new policy but seeks to provide a well-rounded and updated plan for the site which responds to the changed circumstances, and for this to become a material consideration in the determination of future planning applications for the site.

The Draft Masterplan deals with the context, layout, development content, design principles and parameter plans for the site as well as appropriate justifications (particularly where departing from adopted policy). It does not replace the need for planning permission and does not pre-determine any future planning applications, but it does provide a framework for the general co-ordination of development of the site and will become a material consideration in the determination of such planning applications.

Consultation does not seek to open up conversations of whether or not the site should be redeveloped (this principle has already been set by existing adopted policy). Externally, it seeks to gauge public opinion on *how* the site would best be redeveloped and whether the proposals meet their expectations as well as seek inputs from technical stakeholders.

The Draft Masterplan explicitly deviates away from adopted planning policy in a number of places. Consulting the public on this is therefore of increased importance. Furthermore, the NPPF, PPG and National Design Guide are clear on the need for plan making, and Masterplans / Design Guides to be influenced and informed by consultation with local communities.

As such, the purpose of the consultation can be distilled down as follows:

- To seek views of the public with a view to being able to demonstrate broad public support for and benefit of the plans;
- To provide additional justification for the Masterplan and future development to depart from adopted TCAAP policy where appropriate;
- To ensure the Masterplan is technically robust and has taken account of key issues appropriately;
- To comply with the Council's SCI and national policy and guidance on public engagement and consultation;
- To comply with legal requirements (e.g. in relation to SEA and HRA);
- To raise awareness of the Council's aspirations with regards to the development of the key regeneration site in Taunton;
- To clearly demarcate the role of the Council as LPA and as developer and show transparency in the decision-making process; and

- To ensure immediate neighbours of the site and those most likely to be affected are aware of the plans and how other proposals for the site link with the Masterplan.

Who we are consulting

A list of Specific Consultation Bodies, General Consultation Bodies, and other organisations and groups the Council seeks to involve in plan-making is included in the SCI. As a non-statutory plan, there is no statutory list of bodies and organisations that the Council is required to consult in its preparation of the Masterplan. However, all of those on this list have been included in this exercise.

The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SEA Regulations) set out that Historic England, the Environment Agency and Natural England are statutory consultees in relation to the Draft SEA Environmental Report. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (Habitat Regulations) set out that Natural England are statutory consultees in relation to the Draft HRA Appropriate Assessment. Anyone is able to comment on these documents, but these bodies are specifically being invited to respond to them.

The Council is committed to ensuring that local groups, organisations and individuals are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the preparation of planning policy documents.

The Council has a database of consultees, who have either commented upon, or expressed an interest in being involved with the development of local plans. This database is used to keep individuals, companies and organisations informed on the production of the Local Plan and other planning policy documents. New consultees are added to the consultation database via e-mail or letter to the Strategy Team requesting inclusion on to the database. The General Data Protection Regulations are followed to ensure that personal data is only required and retained where proportionate and necessary, is only gathered where explicit consent has been provided, is kept securely and is not disclosed to others. All bodies and persons identified within this database were emailed with notification of the consultation.

How we are consulting

Consultation on the Draft Masterplan will run from 21st November 2022 through to 2nd January 2023 (six weeks). During this time, a variety of methods will be employed as follows.

Responses to the consultation can be made:

- Via the Council's [consultation portal surveys](#);
- By email to strategy@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk;
- By post to Planning Policy and Implementation team, Somerset West and Taunton Council, Deane House, Belvedere Rd, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 1HE.

To publicise the consultation, the Council is:

- Emailing notification of the consultation to all bodies and persons identified within the consultation database;
- Making the consultation documents available for inspection at the following locations:
 - Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, TA1 1HE (Monday – Friday, 8.30am to 5pm)
 - Taunton Library, Priorswood Library (please check with the library in question for their opening times)
- Publishing the documents on the Council's website at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/planning-policy/firepool-masterplan/> and on the Council's consultation portal at <https://firepool.commonplace.is/>. The Council's Consultation webpage at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/consultations/> also contains information directing people to the consultation portal.
- Publishing a press release via the Council's website and social media posts raising interest, communicating the consultation and encouraging participation.
- Hosting an online public presentation and Q&A session (date TBC).
- Hosting an in person drop-in session at Deane House (date TBC).
- Hosting permanent display boards in a unit at the newly completed Coal Orchard development and in prominent public locations on site boundaries.

Previous Consultation

The Council held a public information session on 4th and 5th November 2019. However, this consultation was undertaken in the Council's capacity as developer/landowner/asset holder and was pre-involvement of the Local Planning Authority (LPA), in relation to proposals which had not been informed by engagement with key stakeholders or endorsed by the LPA. The consultation was designed to keep members of the public informed as a revised proposal was being worked through to bring the site forward. It involved presentation of "work in progress" for the site across multiple display boards, which were hosted at Deane House. Following the event, the display boards were uploaded to the Council website as a PDF presentation for all to see at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2121/firepool-consultation.pdf>.

In total, 230 people attended the sessions and a total of 38 written and online comments were received. Comments received were generally positive, and the overwhelming response was a desire to see the site delivered as soon as possible. A summary of responses to the developer-led consultation can be found together with a series of Frequently Asked Questions at <https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/media/2120/firepool-public-information-summary-of-comments.pdf>.

You said, we did

The previous consultation responses have been considered by the developer and informed the evolution of the Masterplan's design. Comments received in response to the current consultation will be taken into account in the development of the final

Masterplan. The final version of this Consultation Statement will summarise comments received and how the final Masterplan has responded where appropriate.

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