

# **Full Council Meeting – 7 February 2023**

## **Portfolio Holder Report for Economic Development, Planning and Transportation – Cllr Mike Rigby.**

### **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. Terms of reference are being drafted and arrangements are now being put in place to hold the initial Delivery Board and Forum meetings in February /March 2023.

#### **Taunton Garden Town – Delivering Our Vision, the Planning Context**

Ahead of LGR it has been agreed to produce a document which will set out the current planning context for the Garden Town in one place. A report is due to be considered at the February meeting of the Executive Committee which seeks to agree its scope and the drafting of the document has commenced. In addition, green infrastructure guidance and a check list has been prepared. This will provide advice to planning applicants/ agents, and a reference point for residents/local groups and prompt the scheme to set out how the proposals respond to a series of key issues. The intent is to aid the delivery of high quality, attractive and sustainable development through the planning process that also takes a holistic approach to green infrastructure.

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

At the meeting in December 2022, the Executive approved the Connecting Our Garden Communities Plan for adoption as a material planning consideration (preparing masterplans, pre-application advice and assessing planning applications) and as corporate policy to inform future policy, project development and funding bids. The final plan is due for adoption by Full Council on 7 February 2023. Consultation on the draft plan took place between 29 July to 30 September 2022 and resulted in 276 responses together with comments made at in-person consultation events. The plan for adoption takes account of comments received and is already influencing developer negotiations and funding bid preparation.

#### **Mobility hubs – Taunton Garden Town**

An initial phase of work is underway 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. The commission includes consideration of 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. These initial phases of work are expected to be completed by the end of March 2023.

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

An Infrastructure Delivery Plan for Taunton Garden Town has been produced and will be used to help assess the infrastructure requirements of new development at planning application stage and will also form part of the evidence base to inform the Somerset wide Local Plan. Further discussions with infrastructure providers will continue to refine requirements. Work to identify future stewardship

opportunities for new community assets is being finalised with further discussions required in the context of the establishment of Taunton Town Council and the proposed transfer of existing assets. Other options identified through the study will also be considered further before a future Council decision. The long term stewardship of community assets is a key principle to realise the Council's vision for the Garden Town.

## **Neighbourhood Planning**

We have five parishes in the District currently progressing 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.

The Draft Wellington Place Plan was approved for public consultation by Executive Committee on 21 December 2022. The consultation is scheduled to run from 23 January to 20 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**

Consultation on the Draft Masterplan concluded on 2 January 2023. LPA officers are in the process of reviewing and summarising consultation responses and clarifying changes and updates necessary to the Masterplan and supporting evidence in response to comments made. The final Masterplan is currently expected to be considered by Full Council for adoption on 28 March 2023.

## **Transportation**

### **Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the A358 Taunton to Southfields Dualling Scheme.**

National Highways (N.H.) are proposing to submit an application to the Secretary of State for a Development Consent Order to dual the A358 between Ilminster and junction 25 of the M5. They had intended to make the formal submission before Christmas, but with the support of the Government, they have taken the decision to pause the Development Consent Order application whilst they undertake a review into the appropriateness of the environmental mitigations proposed for the project. The effect of this will be to move the submission date into 2023, now expected to be later in January.

As a highways scheme, the Highway Authority at the County Council are taking the lead. This means that until Vesting Day, the County (both their Highways and Planning teams) will be co-

ordinating required responses and the two district authorities affected by the proposal (SWaT & SSDC) will feed into the processes.

Following formal submission the Councils will need to produce an 'Adequacy of Consultation' report. This will be based on the facts of the performance of National Highways during the various consultation phases over the last few years

Work has also commenced on the required Local Impact Report (L.I.R.), as the fixed timelines for documentation submission at the various stages of an examination process are defined and very tight. Most of the work on this will not be possible until National Highways have formally submitted their application, when we will be able to see what the exact proposal is and gauge how it will impact.

## **Development Management Update**

### **Performance**

A report on Development Management performance was provided for Scrutiny Committee on 4 January 2023. 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, the Lead Local Flood Authority and highways.

### **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.

## **Major and Special Projects**

### **Active Travel Projects**

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

##### **Bridge over the Tone**

There have been 25 representations to date, both positive and negative and discussion continue with the LPA prior to a decision being made. The team is seeking to appoint a contractor to develop the Technical designs and manage construction works. Bids have been received and are being reviewed with an appointment due in Feb 2023. The Design and construction phases will each take about 6 months each, subject to planning permission.

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 still 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 previous project resource has moved to a new position, with the job now advertised externally to seek the appropriate candidate to deliver these priority schemes. It is hoped that a new Project

Manager will join the team in Feb-23. This change will not impact on the overall programme of works for the FHSF route.

### **Feasibility work - Cycling schemes**

Work has just begun with consultants on developing a strategic outline business case for sustainable travel and cycling options on the Wellington and separately Bishops Lydeard cycle links to Taunton. Work is expected to take 8-9 months, during which time stakeholders will be involved in assessing options.

### **Steam Coast Trail**

Designs and options are being explored with landowners at Blue Anchor and in Washford, which could potentially lead to new improved sections of the trail, and ambitions to connect communities along West Somerset's coastline.

### **Heritage at Risk**

#### **Tonedale Mill**

Discussions continue with the owners regarding the urgent works and the long-term plans for the site. As of January 2023 these discussions will be with a new team appointed by Mancraft. 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 in Summer 2022. A certificate of lawful use has been received and is currently being determined by the Planning Department.

#### **Toneworks**

Phase 2 works were completed in November 2022. SWT were successful at receiving a further £185k funding from Historic England and Phase 3 is currently in train and due for completion in May 2023. The HAR team ran a successful event in November which celebrated the work to date and allowed the first tranche of public access into the site.

#### **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. The Emergency works package is underway and initial planning discussions have started over the future conversion of the mansion house.

### **Regen Programme**

#### **Coal Orchard**

Construction works are now completed. A new commercial agent is now in place, with ongoing negotiations on several commercial units continuing.

Lease agreements for the Car Club proposal are drawing to a conclusion, after which lining, signage and charging head units can be installed ready for go live as soon as practicable.

#### **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 has begun for 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 to incorporate a reopened bus station together with wider mobility components.

## **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. Construction is due to complete in the Spring '23.

### **Infrastructure, Utilities and Flood Work**

Infrastructure work (Drainage and Levels) commenced on 7 November 2022, with a build programme of approximately 6 months. Work is progressing well with the main drainage excavation work underway.

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. Design

### **Northern and Southern Boulevard Construction**

Following grant of planning permission in 2022, tender documentation is being prepared with a view to starting construction works on the Boulevard public realm work on the conclusion of the Drainage and Levels infrastructure contract.

### **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 draft final report was submitted in December 2022 and officers provided comment on the report in early January 2023. The final version is due in the next few weeks 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

### Somerset Innovation Exchange

The event took place in September 2022. It showcased local innovation, and skills development opportunities facilitated business-to-business contacts and acted as a positive investment message for Taunton, attracting 180 delegates and over 60 speakers, session leads and exhibitors. Work continues with the local network leads to shape the provision of future innovation support activity.

### Innovation Support

SWT has supported the commissioning of a county-wide innovation support service that will work with individual businesses to understand the support needed to grow innovation in the county. The service will deliver events and webinars with the aim to address issues and barriers such as access to finance and developing talent pools; support delivery within the Innovation Centres across the County; and develop the ecosystem needed to ensure the County is a growth hotspot for innovation.

### Inward Investment

Work continues on the promotion of SWT as an inward investment 'growth hotspot'. Much of the content from this work is scheduled to transfer in Spring 2023 into an 'Invest Somerset' website to promote Somerset as a key place to grow and invest.

### Town Centre Regeneration

SWT is leading the development of a Town Centre Strategic Framework for Somerset as part of the LGR work programme. The last vacancy count shows that Taunton has a vacancy rate of 10.08% which is expected to be below the national vacant unit rate. Minehead's vacancy rate is also expected to be below national rates (to be confirmed in February). Work continues to link up enquiries with letting agents and shopping centres. A Ukrainian pop-up shop will be opening in the Orchard Centre in Taunton in the next month and a craft workshop will open in support of Taunton's new piece of public art arriving in February. The economic development team and partners are working on the delivery of a district wide Town Centre Event programme for 2023 including plans for a Coronation celebration in Castle Green along with community and commercial events throughout 2023.

The Economic Development Team have facilitated a number of events in Council owned Parks and Open spaces across the District over the last 3 months, these events have an impact on the vibrancy of and attract footfall into our Town Centres.

Day	Date	Event	Venue / location
Sunday	02 October 2022	Minehead Triathlon	Minehead Esplanade
Sunday	02 October 2022	Wellington Film Festival	Wellington Park
Sunday	09 October 2022	Taunton Independent Market	Castle Green, Taunton
Saturday	15 October 2022	Classic Car Display - in collaboration with Taunton Carnival	Castle Green, Taunton
Saturday	22 October 2022	Poppy Appeal Launch	Taunton town centre - various locations including Fore Street and Market House

Monday	24 October 2022	West Country Cloverleaf Car Rally (1 of 2)	Castle Green, Taunton
Wednesday	26 October 2022	Wacky Wednesday	Wellington Park
Thursday	27 October 2022	West Country Cloverleaf Car Rally (2 of 2)	Castle Green, Taunton
Saturday	29 October 2022	Moonlit Meadow Run	French Weir and Longrun Meadow, Taunton
Sunday	13 November 2022	SWT Remembrance Service	Taunton town centre and Vivary Park
Sunday	13 November 2022	Taunton Independent Market	Castle Green, Taunton
Sunday	20 November 2022	Winterfest Taunton	Taunton town centre and Castle Green
Thursday	24 November 2022	Firewalk for Children's Hospice South West	Castle Green, Taunton
Saturday	10 December 2022	Taunton Independent Market	Castle Green, Taunton
Sunday	11 December 2022	Taunton Independent Market	Castle Green, Taunton

### **Visitor Economy and Tourism Sector Support**

A South West tourism research project and Somerset-wide visitor survey is underway and due for completion in May 2023. The research aims to inform future support needs for the sector and to understand visitor needs and behaviour to ensure Somerset provides a relevant tourism offer. The West Coast 360 programme, which supports excellence in the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors in West Somerset will be refreshed and relaunched in Spring 2023. Public realm improvement works continue in Minehead along the seafront, the Gabion artwork competition has been completed and the artwork has been refreshed and a planning application has been submitted for new shelters on the seafront. The Minehead Coast Development Trust is undertaking a consultation on the design and the shelters are planned for installation in 2023.

### **Food and Drink Sector Support**

The SWT Economic Development Team developed and launched a grant scheme to build capacity in the sector and support business growth in December 2022. There was a strong response from the sector and applications are now closed. A programme of sector support events will be delivered in February 2023 including 'Meet the Buyer' and 'Business resilience' events and training workshops on public sector procurement, allergens and labelling, food photography, and 1-1 sessions on intellectual property.

### **Supporting Businesses to Net Zero**

An Energy Efficiency Grant Scheme was launched in December 2022 to support businesses at the start of their journey to net zero. Applications are now closed with awards to be made in February. The grants also help local businesses to reduce energy costs during the current energy crisis.

### **Local Labour Agreements**

A proposal will be coming forward to the Executive in February to introduce obligations on developers to deliver targets and activities that ensure local labour is used, and training and apprenticeships are offered to local people during the construction and operational phases of new developments across the District.

## **Skills and Employment**

A range of events will be delivered to support people into work and training across the district including:

- Jobs Fair: Taunton Glass Box (Taunton Library) 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2023, 10 am – 12:30 pm, 17 exhibitors.
- Micro providers virtual events. Two events are to be held to offer support to existing and new micro providers in the care sector on 7<sup>th</sup> Feb 2023, 11:30 am – 12:30 pm and 6:30 pm – 7:30 pm.
- HPC employment and skills drop-ins will be held at the Community Employment Hubs in Taunton, Wellington, Minehead and Williton
- Jobs Fair: Somerset Cricket Ground 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2023, 10:30 – 3:30 pm in the Colin Atkinson Pavilion, 50 exhibitors

## **External Operations & Assets**

### **West Somerset Railway: Disposal of car park and toilets, off Station Road Bishops Lydeard.**

#### **Update**

Purchaser's title investigations are now complete, and we anticipate that the transfer will take place before 31/3/2023. The latest hold up in this somewhat protracted process is that there has been a change of Directors at WSR and this has delayed the signing of the agreement.

Once completed SWT will receive £50,000 and transfer maintenance responsibilities for the free to use gravel car park and WC block to West Somerset Railway

### **Pedestrian Bridge – Goodlands Gardens**

The pedestrian bridge over the River Tone to/from Goodlands Gardens was closed following a routine inspection which found significant structural weakness in the bridge joists.

A further inspection has taken place and we have now received the full structural report which confirms the bridge is not viable to repair. We are compiling a report giving options for discussion with Councillors and Senior Officers.

### **Northern Gardens Taunton**

Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS) contacted us with a complaint that the wall alongside the Mill Leat, opposite the Museum entrance, is in danger of collapse with considerable vegetation and small trees growing out of the stonework.

The Leat is between Goodlands Gardens and Northern Gardens and the gardens around the Museum are the responsibility of the Council under a lease from SANHS. This wall prevents the public from falling into the watercourse and provides a retaining function for the ground at higher level outside the Museum.



We have carried out initial clearance and are now awaiting reports from both structural engineers and heritage experts before proceeding further.

Our experience with repair and rebuild of heritage walls shows that significant sums of money are likely to be required. We are unable to accurately estimate costs at this time, but they are likely to be in the region of £150,000 - £200,000 at a minimum (based on Stogursey Church wall for example)

The Heritage advisor has indicated that approval for works is likely to be a lengthy process. We have instructed a structural survey to be carried out now, with the ambition of being able to create a specification for works, obtain external and internal approvals and go to tender during 2023. We anticipate expenditure to be during 2023/24 financial year and will flag as a budget requirement for capital expenditure.

### **Flook House External Area**

A meeting between representatives of SWT CICCIC (the Community Arts Lead Tenant) and Councillors Sully and Ellis took place on 18 November identify a safeguarding solution and to mitigate the impact of Anti-Social Behaviour in this area.

A reduced project scope to provide gates at the rear of the building is being funded by the ELIF fund.

### **U3 Blackdown Business Park**

Sylvan Road, Wellington.

The sale of this unit has been approved by the relevant S151 Officer and is now with legal.

Once complete the purchaser will transfer £230,000 to SWT and become responsible for the required update works and any future upkeep and maintenance.

It is anticipated that the sale will proceed to completion prior to 31/3/2023.

### **Lease of Blenheim Gardens Café, Minehead**

The tenant had previously been advised that refurbishment can continue on a like for like basis and that any major changes would need planning consent. Our planning team have requested confirmation of details of the new windows to confirm they are like for like. Other minor refurbishment is continuing with the intention that the café opens by the end of March.

### **Parks Walk WC's, Minehead.**

Due to the recent flooding, the applicant has withdrawn. We are assessing a further enquiry. If use cannot be found for the building, removal may be considered.

### **Former Mount Street Nursery**

We are continuing to explore the best way to remove 'tent dwellers' in liaison with the police and Shape legal.

We are also progressing a lease with the adjacent Taunton Deane Cricket Club to permit car parking for the club on a small area of the site (pending planning permission). Draft heads of terms have been issued to the club.

Before assessing options for the remainder of the site an ecological survey would be required – the area may be a possible area for additional tree planting – this would be led by the Climate Change Team.

### **Minor Works**

Works to the electrical systems at the Crematorium, the bandstand in Vivary Park and repairs to Stogursey Church wall have all been completed.

## **General**

The team continue to engage with the Technology Forge project team to audit and load full SWT property data onto the new database.

## **Commercial Services**

### **Crescent Car Park Improvement Project**

Work on phase one of the Crescent car park commenced on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> January and will continue until March 2023. Phase 2 will start straight after and due to finish in June.

The project will see the delivery of 19 electric vehicle charging units, solar powered ticket machines, additional accessible parking spaces , new LED lighting, a new cycle shelter. The site will be enhanced with additional trees sited around the carpark.

### **EV Charging**

EV Charging infrastructure has been installed within the below car parks, between August and January. The 16 new charge points have provided the following totals for public usage.

782 charging Sessions, 12,554.37 kWh, 7.1 CO2 saving: EV Miles: 36,784

### **Card Payments**

During 2022/23 the % of car park income which is cashless has increased from 57.3% to 63.5%. The increase is in part a result of the 25 parking machines replaced within the West Somerset area in April 2022. Offering this is both popular with customers and saves on cash collections.

## **Remedial Works**

### **Orchard Centre**

A contract has been awarded to carry out remedial works to the Orchard Centre car park. The works commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2023 and are planned to be completed by the end of March.

### **High Street Rebuild Wall Works**

A contract to carry out the rebuilding of the wall to the side of the High Street car park, the area which backs onto Mendip house. The works started in November and should be completed by February.

This work is part of the essential reinvestment in the Councils parking assets and is completed while keeping the car parks operational.