

Full Council Meeting – 28 March 2023

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

Annual Report.

Planning

Taunton Garden Town

Over the past year work connected with Taunton Garden Town has achieved significant progress.

- A governance structure was agreed by the Executive on 16 November 2022 and following the appointment of an Independent Chair, the first meeting of the Delivery Board took place on 27th February 2023 with arrangements now being made for Forum meetings in April.
- Taunton Garden Town – Delivering Our Vision, the Planning Context document is being finalised and sets out the current planning context for the Garden Town in one place, together with 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.
- Reports have been commissioned and delivered on future options for stewardship of community assets and future infrastructure needs via a Garden Town Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP). These will inform future work areas. Stewardship has been raised in the context of the establishment of Taunton Town Council and the creation of new community assets via the Shadow Town Council. Other options identified through the study will also be considered further before a future Council decision. The IDP assesses the infrastructure requirements of new development at planning application stage and will form part of the evidence base to inform the Somerset wide Local Plan.
- Significant work has also taken place on active travel. The Connecting our Garden Communities – Active Travel Infrastructure for Taunton Garden Town Plan was adopted at Full Council on 7th February 2023 as a material consideration in the preparation of masterplans, pre-application advice, assessing planning applications and any other development management purposes across Taunton Garden Town, and as corporate policy to inform future policy and project development and funding bids. The Plan is already informing the preparation of masterplans, pre-application advice and planning applications, and has directly informed and influenced the Taunton element of the recently submitted Active Travel Fund 4 funding bid led by Somerset County Council. In line with comments made at Full Council, officers are due to meet with stakeholders in the next few weeks to further discuss route prioritisation and the process for delivery.
- The development of strategy and network approach to mobility hubs for Taunton Garden Town has been prepared. The initial phase of work considers 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 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 Bus sites at strategic sites in Taunton Garden Town.
- The Taunton Garden Town garden community sites have also progressed with further planning permissions granted for residential phases and primary school at Comeytrove coupled with the grant of planning permission for an offsite phosphates solution at Staplegrove in connection with the western part of the site and the grant of an initial reserved matters planning permission for certain non-residential elements. A revised masterplanning

exercise is underway in connection with a live planning application at Monkton Heathfield phase 2. As of the end of November 2022, housing completions at Garden Town sites included Comeytrove (115), Monkton Heathfield (1,199) and Nerrols (362). The Coal Orchard site in the town centre has also been completed with 42 completions (also see update below).

- During 22/23 £650,000 Garden Town funding was successfully bid for and secured, supporting work commissions and feasibility studies as well as ensuring core staff are in place to oversee the project, maintain momentum and input the necessary green infrastructure and transport expertise.
- Firepool - The Firepool Masterplan is being recommended for adoption as a material planning consideration in the preparation of pre-application advice, assessing planning applications and any other development management purposes as part of this same meeting of Full Council. For further details please see this agenda item.

Neighbourhood Planning

There are five parishes in the District currently progressing Neighbourhood Plans. In the past year the West Monkton & Cheddon Fitzpaine Revised Neighbourhood Plan was Made, this was the first Revised NP in the SWT area.

Wellington Railway 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.

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.

A consultation on the Draft Wellington Place Plan was held 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 in considering regeneration activities to ensure we are creating a quality place in Wellington.

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 moves the submission date into 2023, but it is not yet possible to be certain about the exact timing.

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 coordinating

required responses and the two district authorities affected by the proposal (SWT & SSSDC) 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 Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 4 January 2023. This report, together with a series of tables within the accompanying presentation <https://democracy.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk/documents/s20936/PlanningPerformancePresentationfor4123.pdf> set out information on casework levels and performance in the determination of planning applications, appeals and enforcement cases as well as the issues facing the service including the challenges arising from the need to provide phosphate mitigation in order to allow development in much of the former Taunton Deane area. It also provided an update on the 5-year housing land supply, most recently calculated as 7.04 years in the former West Somerset area (March 2022) and 5.06 years in the former Taunton Deane area (November 2022).

Phosphates continues to impact planning applications, with approximately 167 planning applications/discharge of conditions held up (equating to approximately 3,200 homes). However, with the roll out of one of the first P-credit schemes in England, P-credits have at the current time been offered to approximately 50 planning applications and where possible some applicants are progressing their own phosphate mitigation measures. Meaningful progress has therefore been made over the past year to start to address the application backlog resulting from phosphates.

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

The team have had another very busy year, with significant progress made across all areas, and a further pipeline of activity that will continue into the new Council. Many project and programme teams within SWT already work effectively across district and county departments, so the changes to Somerset Council will serve to further breakdown barriers to delivery. The team are back up to full strength, with a full complement of staff looking forward to getting to site and delivering the benefits of the projects listed below.

Active Travel Projects

Future High Street Fund (FHSF) Cycling and Walking Schemes

Bridge over the Tone

Following an options appraisal and early design work, and subsequent submission of the planning application, the team are working through issues raised via the EA and other stakeholders, including a petition that was heard at Executive in February. This additional work will look to provide assurance that any bridge proposal that is taken forward is the appropriate balance of form, function, cost, whilst minimising any environmental and ecological impacts.

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 – have progressed from concept to technical review and are on course for delivery in 23-24.

The Design and Implementation of Cycle Hubs

Providing secure, weather-proof locations for bike parking, have moved on with delivery imminent in the Crescent Car Park (alongside the car park refurbishment work). The team have identified several exemplar projects across the country that will translate well into Taunton as pilot schemes, that could subsequently be rolled out across the County if successful. The hubs will provide Taunton's first such facilities, providing sheltered cycle parking with public cycle repair stands and tyre pumps, with St James Street bike park as a target location, and other sites in the town centre being assessed (including the renewed provision of a mobility hub at the old bus station site)

Feasibility Work - Cycling Schemes

The respective schemes linking Wellington and Bishops Lydeard to Taunton have been subject to significant stakeholder engagement over the last year. Following identification of funding, the work to develop a strategic outline business case for sustainable travel and cycling options is now underway.

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. Stakeholder engagement with officers from both SCC and SWT continues.

Heritage at Risk

The Heritage at Risk programme goes from strength to strength. Whilst the benefits are often specific to individual buildings or sites, the incremental improvement, and the engagement with national funding partners such as Historic England, is raising the profile of this work and its regeneration potential. The work often draws in many other fields of expertise, such as flood mitigation, renewable energy, art, culture and manufacturing that far exceed the core remit of removing these priority sites from the heritage at risk register and back into meaningful use. The team are also working successfully across district boundaries in many instances.

Tonedale Mill

Discussions continue with the owners regarding the urgent works and the long-term regeneration plans for the site. As of January 2023 these discussions have been 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 LPA.

Toneworks

Phase 3 of repairs are currently underway 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. A full programme of access/opening to the public is planned for Summer 2023. Discussions continue with possible futures of the site for the long-term sustainable use of the site and for future phases of fundraising to secure the rest of the site for the future.

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 planning discussions continue over the future conversion of the mansion house. Over the past year 7 units have been completed and are now occupied.

Regen Programme

Coal Orchard

Following the project stalling temporarily in Feb '22, the team were able to restart and ultimately complete the construction of the Coal Orchard mixed use in scheme in November '22. At time of writing, all but two of the residential units were occupied, including all of the discounted open market units that were subject to strict criteria relating to income and local connections.

A new commercial agent is now in place, with ongoing negotiations on several commercial units continuing. Two of the eight units are close to agreement.

Complex 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. This pilot is another that will be used as a case study to potentially expand beyond Taunton into the wider County.

Bus Station & Changing Places Facility

The team have been working with SCC colleagues on potential layout designs for a renewed mobility hub at the old bus station site. This will incorporate the Bus Service Improvement Plan funding, to provide a safe, accessible transport hub that delivers many more elements than bus stops and layover space, potentially including EV charging, e-bikes and e-scooters, secure bike parking, waiting facilities and a changing places facility. The wider benefits of this facility will be subject to public consultation when design has developed further.

Firepool

Works on the key infrastructure is now well underway at Firepool, whilst the masterplan work with LPA colleagues has progressed in parallel (see agenda for 28th March Full Council meeting on the masterplan). This work has engaged with statutory, community and public stakeholders, with several well attended events online and in person over the last twelve months. This is in addition to engagement with quality review panels and tendering for contractors.

Now work has started on site, the team are looking to engage with developers and end users to ensure that once the infrastructure and public realm works are completed, meaningful development can continue.

Digital Innovation Centre

SWT are continuing to work in collaboration with SCC on delivery of a 2400m² 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.

Northern and Southern Boulevard Construction

Following grant of planning permission in 2022, the tender process is now open for the Boulevard public realm work on the conclusion of the Drainage and Levels infrastructure contract. Award of a contract is expected in Summer '23.

Heat Network Mapping, Masterplanning and Early Feasibility

The final heat network feasibility report has now been received. Officers are working internally, with the commissioned consultants Sustainable Energy Ltd, and with representatives from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to plot out next steps ahead of organising a member and senior officer briefing on the report and opportunities identified.

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

Taking place in September 2022, this event showcased local innovation, skills development opportunities, facilitated business-to-business contacts and acted as a positive investment message for Taunton. It attracted 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. A series of further events has been arranged under the Somerset Innovation Exchange umbrella, including business workshops on topics such as digital adoption, sustainability and finance, as well as support for the Digital Somerset network and for the Tech South-West summit.

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. This is a three-year innovation service to be delivered by Business West and with an innovation advisor in each of the three physical innovation centres across Somerset. 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.

Innovation District and Innovation Leadership Group (ILG)

- 1. Infrastructure** – a digital innovation centre of Firepool due to be completed in summer 2023, the private sector led Collar factory next to the Cricket ground which supports a range of businesses linked to the cultural and creative sector and the former Rutherford diagnostics centre now having been taken over by Alliance Health as a Joint Venture with the Somerset

NHS Trust. A new and exciting addition to the infrastructure and healthcare innovation activity is the successful £20m joint levelling up bid for the health and training centre for social care with Sedgemoor and SWT, involving redevelopment of the former Bridgwater Hospital, a physical presence in Minehead of an outreach centre to deploy innovative use of remote healthcare technologies.

- 2. Innovation conference and events** – the first ever successful innovation conference with 180 delegates and representatives from national and local innovation bodies and sectors that showcased future innovation and technology market opportunities across a range of markets including renewable and zero carbon energy; digital, AI and Big data; agritech; healthtech and advanced manufacturing – subsequent events are being held under the promotional umbrella of Somerset Innovation Exchange.
- 3. Innovation support services** – a three-year innovation support service has been commissioned for Business West to deliver innovation services and have the advice of innovation advisors based at the three physical innovation centres of iAero, Digital Innovation Centre and the Somerset energy innovation centres
- 4. Cluster development and networking** – Digital Somerset, Somerset Arts and Business Cultural Alliance and the cultural forum are further developing their cluster activity and development as well as sub-regional joining up of healthcare cluster networks such as the Academic Health Science Network and Medilink South West. As all district officers were in support of a hub and spoke innovation community across Somerset following the ethos of the Connected Places Catapult report, it will be for the new Unitary executive to consider this report and future Governance and operational structures.

Shared Prosperity Fund

SWT were closely involved with other LAs in shaping the prospectus for funding which was approved by Government shortly before Xmas 2022. Since then, County have been leading as the accountable body for the funds.

There is £7.2m available and a commissioning plan will be produced in April 2023, showing specific investment themes and indicative budget allocations and then running a series of processes (procurements, calls for proposals or in-house) to make investments against those themes.

Emergency High Street Recovery Fund (ETCRF): SWT Council Extension

Extra Funds were provided to the town Centre Groups established during the Covid Recovery Period. Post April the 1st 2022 when the original ETCRF finished, reports were provided, and it was agreed that we would continue for a year with unspent allocated funds. These funds we divided up amongst the town in proportion with the Town Centre Retail size.

Final Reports have been requested for April 2023 when the fund completes on the 31st of March 2023.

Quarterly Meeting with Town Centre Projects Teams were held providing project updates. This will continue in 2023 to maintain good local connections and two-way community communications.

Welcome Back Fund (European Regional Development Fund Covid Recovery Projects)

All funds that were Purchased by Somerset West and Taunton Council for the Welcome Back Fund's Town Projects were successfully recovered with the European Regional Development Fund.

Over 134 Procurement Transactions to the value of £328,390.89 were made and towards the town Centre projects for 2022.

Quarterly Meeting with Town Centre Projects Teams were held providing project updates.

Somerset Futures Scenarios 2050

SWT have been closely involved in the development of this strategy which has been finalised in Jan/Feb 2023. This will help inform the approach to developing a new Somerset Council economic development strategy under the new Unitary.

Local Labour Agreements

A proposal went 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. This was adopted and we are working closely with colleagues to develop a Process and Communication plan and ensure the benefits of this begin to come into play with new developments received.

Co-development of the Rural Enterprise Exmoor Vision

[Exmoor - Rural Enterprise Exmoor Vision \(exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk\)](http://exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk) - setting out a vision and objectives for the next 10 years on Exmoor taking advantage of its natural capital and entrepreneurial spirit. A business directory has recently been published and other workstreams are progressing which could potentially be funded through the Rural Shared Prosperity Fund, for which there is £3m until the end of 2025.

Facilitation of the Minehead Plan – Inspiring People and Place

A refreshed strategy for the economic development priorities for Minehead and its community has been published. Minehead People and Place partnership has been formed and key stakeholders are working on delivering key actions from the plan.

Employment Land Study

Secured the completion of an initial feasibility study for the potential development of Council-owned employment sites in West Somerset. This was in response to the need in that area with 6 companies requiring expansion space and action required to retain and support businesses. Proposals would require acquisition of land, therefore further work to progress proposals would require a decision by the new Unitary Authority.

Company, Industry and Town Centre Data (HUQ, mnAI Systems)

- MnAI: A Company and Industry database license was purchased for 2022. This has provided data to back up reports and for backbone to proposals and wider Economic Development Work. and we have negotiated an extension into 2023/24 which will allow the licence to cover the Unitary authority area.

- HUQ Industries: Were commissioned to provide a report with the following aims:
Using Huq's mobility data, we are measuring data from Community Vision designed to show us our town centre footfall levels and provide us with supporting data to best understand our visitors.

This report covers the modules you have subscribed to and a summary of key initial findings:

- How are our town centres recovering?
- How has visitor behaviour changed year on year?
- How have events impacted footfall for each town centre?

Inward Investment

Work took place in the early part of 2022 on the promotion of SWT as an inward investment 'growth hotspot'. In early 2023 the content from this work has been transferred 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. An audit is progressing on approaches to operational support and management of key settlements across the County and this will inform work to be taken forward by Somerset Council.

The last vacancy count shows that Taunton has a vacancy rate of 10.08% which is just below the national rate of 10.2%. Minehead's vacancy rate is 4%. 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 soon.

The Economic Development Team and Cultural Team are working on plans for a Coronation celebration in Castle Green.

The Economic Development Team have facilitated a number of events in Council owned Parks and Open spaces across the District over the year – more information can be found within the Culture Portfolio report (Cllr Ellis). These events continue to have a positive impact on our town's vibrancy and attract increased footfall into our Town Centres.

Visitor Economy and Tourism Sector Support

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, planning approval was granted in February for two esplanade shelters. The shelters are planned to be installed later this year.

An agreement between SWT Assets Team and Minehead and Coast Development will be put in place for the maintenance and upkeep of the shelters.

The Minehead Bay Festival planning is underway for September this year, event planners are looking at sustainable options for the event to continue beyond the funding.

SWT are working very closely with EDF, SDC and SCC on a marketing/PR tender and a destination marketing delivery tender. The Marketing and PR packages are to support the tourism industry through regional and national marketing during EDF's occupation of Pontins for 3 years. The tourism contribution is aimed at increasing economic productivity and sustainability of activity, taking advantage of the opportunities, and mitigating any challenges as a result of a significant number of bedspaces being lost and the visitor landscape changing.

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 'Meet the Buyer' event was held in February 2023 - including the opportunity to book onto workshops- food photography, procurement and, allergens and labelling, one-to-one intellectual property sessions were also offered. All places offered on each were fully taken up. We are now working in partnership with SCC on a farming and food conference due to be held later this year.

B3191 Road Closure (Cleeve Hill, Watchet)

We are working closely with SCC and local stakeholder groups to understand the issues and real impacts as result of the road closure

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. Round 2 of the Energy Efficiency Grant scheme has been launched, this phase is due to close at the end of March.

General business support

A 'Business resilience' event was held in partnership with The Growth Hub and Taunton Chamber of Commerce. A well-received event with over 40 businesses benefitting from a full day's event.

Involvement in the Flooding response to ensure business needs are identified, recorded and represented in assessing both the recent impact and future support.

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) 21st March 2023, 10 am – 12:30 pm, 19 exhibitors.
- Recruit West Somerset/ Cost of Living Support Event 23rd March at The Minehead Eye, Minehead 10am – 1:30pm 35 employers and 13 support organisations/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 28th March 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
- Landscape management and skills programme for NEETS and the unemployed, delivered by AONB - To provide training in rural skills to local communities providing opportunities for re-training or upskilling. Including skills for agriculture, forestry, heathland and conservation and a traditional skills scheme involving funding for anyone to learn traditional skills to manage the landscape including hedge-laying, coppicing, pollarding, ditching, pond building and restoration, fencing, species identification and using associated tools and machinery.
- Successful Jobs Fair: Somerset Cricket Ground 23rd Feb 2023, 10:30 – 3:30 pm in the Colin Atkinson Pavilion, 55 exhibitors 655 people attended the highest number at this venue and event thus far.

SWT Community Employment Hubs continue to operate in Wellington/Taunton/Minehead/Williton/Stogursey to support people towards work, days and times and venues of operation are here: [Community employment hubs \(somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk\)](https://www.somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk) Community Employment Hub engagement is increasing. Two new members of staff are now in post for 12mths until Jan 2024; a hub support officer and a hub volunteer recruitment and training officer.

In light of the new council, the SWT employment and support lead is hosting/chairing Employment Support Group (ESG) meetings for the whole of Somerset to ensure we are sharing critical updates/information to support employment and skills across the whole County on a fortnightly basis with key strategic partners and organisations.

External Operations & Assets

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

The Council has agreed to dispose of the gravel car park and unused toilet block next to the West Somerset Railway Station in Bishops Lydeard for £50,000.

Purchaser's title investigations are now complete but there have been a series of frustrating delays with this arrangement. The latest delay in this somewhat protracted process is clarification regarding access for those using the station over a footpath owned by Wessex Water. We are working to clarify this matter by acquiring the required easement from Wessex Water but this will not be resolved before 31/3/23.

Once completed the Council 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 at the end of November following a routine inspection which found significant structural weakness in the bridge joists.

A further inspection took place and the full structural report confirms the bridge is 'end of life' and not viable to repair.

Given that the bridge cannot be repaired we are planning to have it removed. This requires certain consents - notably from the Environment Agency. There are pedestrian and vehicular crossing points within 150m both upstream and downstream. We are seeking costs to replace the bridge in order that Councillors can decide whether to replace – at this stage it should be anticipated that any replacement would cost at least £400,000.

Northern Gardens Taunton

The wall which bounds the millstream alongside the Taunton Museum is the responsibility of the Council. 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 Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS). Following a structural assessment the wall is considered to be in danger of collapse due to considerable vegetation and small trees growing out of the stonework.

This wall forms an edge protection for the watercourse and provides a retaining function for the ground at higher level outside the Museum.

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 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.

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 the recent rebuild of Stogursey Church wall)

Flook House External Area

A scheme to provide metal gates and limited fencing to the rear of Flook House to prevent unwanted access to doors and windows will be completed before the end of March 2023.

U3 Blackdown Business Park, Sylvan Road, Wellington.

The Council has agreed to dispose of Unit 3 of the Blackdown Business Park and 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 of the Blenheim Gardens Café in Minehead has made good recent progress with refurbishment of the dilapidated building with an intention to reopen it as a café on 1st April 2023.

Those elements that require planning permission (notably a new deck area and accessible ramp) are the subject of an application which will be heard by the Planning Committee in late March.

New windows and a new entry door have already been fitted, repairs to the roof are complete and a new kitchen is being installed in the café.

The project has not been without complications, but significant progress is now being made and we are confident that the gardens will have a café in April 2023.

Former Mount Street Nursery

There have been people living in a 'tented encampment' in and around the Old Nursery site at the end of Mount Street for approximately 5 years.

The Council's rough sleeper unit has consistently offered support and accommodation to those who are local and support to resettle to those who have arrived from outside the area – such offers have been rejected.

We have explored the option of implementing a 'closure order' but due to cost this is no longer our preferred option (or that of the police).

Officers have sent all required information to Shape (our legal service providers) in order that they can progress the matter under trespass legislation. This process is taking longer than anyone would like.

At the same time we are 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, Environment and Sustainability Team in the new Council.

Other Assets Works in 2022/23

Works to replace the entire electrical systems at the Crematorium have been completed in year and without requiring the crematorium to be closed. This was a major achievement and ensures that we have a compliant electrical system at the crematorium for the foreseeable future.

Necessary underpinning works have been completed to prevent the further deterioration of the bandstand in Vivary Park. This was achieved with minimal disruption to park users. Decoration works have started and will be completed to the bandstand in spring 2023.

The church wall at Stogursey has been rebuilt using traditional methods. Despite a challenging environment this has been achieved on time and on budget.

The famous lighthouse at Watchet was repainted in the autumn on 2022. This is always a complicated project given the weather and the need to ensure that no paint makes its way into the marine environment.

General

The assets team continue to engage with the Technology Forge project team to audit and load full SWT property data onto the new database in readiness for the new Council – this has been a truly monumental task alongside the normal busy works programme.

Commercial Services

Parking

We have invested back into our car parks during the past year with the completion of essential works to the two multi storeys and the resurfacing and relining of many of the car parks. Other works include:

New Parking Machines in West Somerset Area

We have completed the installation of 25 new parking terminals within the West Somerset Area of the district, which have allowed customers to pay for parking sessions using contactless card payments as well as cash. The old machines were old and prone to breakdowns. The new machines also give much better information on usage to base future decisions on.

Electric Charging Spaces

Working in partnership with our electric vehicle charge point supplier, we have been expanding electric vehicle charging network in our car parks. We now have 28 charging points with more planned to be installed in the next 12 months.

Crescent Car Park Improvement Project

Works have commenced and are due to be completed in May for the revamp of this car park. 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 car park.