

Application Details	
Application Reference Number:	38/21/0436
Application Type:	Full Application
Description	Erection of an office building with ancillary ground floor commercial use (Class E), conversion and erection of extension to the GWR building to form restaurant (Class E), public realm, landscaping and associated infrastructure works on land to the south of Trenchard Way, (Block 3), Firepool, Taunton
Site Address:	FIREPOOL Regeneration Site, South of Trenchard Way, Canal Road/Priory Bridge Road, Taunton
Parish:	Taunton unparished area
Conservation Area:	No
Somerset Levels and Moors RAMSAR Catchment area:	Yes
AONB:	No
Case Officer:	Simon Fox, Major Projects Officer (Planning) 07392 316159 s.fox@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk Should you wish to discuss the contents of this report item please use the contact details above by 5pm on the day before the meeting, or if no direct contact can be made please email: planning@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk
Agent:	J Price Consulting
Applicant:	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Reason for reporting application to Members:	In the interests of probity - The proposal is submitted by Somerset West and Taunton Council on a strategic regeneration site owned by Somerset West and Taunton Council.

1. Recommendation

That planning permission be **GRANTED** subject to conditions

2. Executive Summary of key reasons for recommendation

- 2.1 The application seeks permission for the northern gateway into the Firepool site, enclosed by a new office building and the northern portion of the boulevard. After consideration of all representations, planning policy and material considerations including the planning history, the scope of the application and the knock-on benefits of the scheme the application is considered appropriate to be recommended for approval subject to the conditions listed at Appendix 1 to this report.

3. Planning Obligations, conditions and informatives

3.1 Obligations

None

3.2 Conditions (see Appendix 1 for full wording)

- 1) Time Limit
- 2) Drawing numbers
- 3) Clarification of Use/Permitted Development Rights – Office Building
- 4) Clarification of Use/Permitted Development Rights – GWR Building
- 5) Materials
- 6) Biodiversity Enhancement Plan
- 7) Archaeology
- 8) Construction Environmental Management Plan
- 9) Flood Risk Assessment
- 10) Unexpected Contamination
- 11) Plant, Machinery and Equipment
- 12) Landscape and Ecological Management Plan
- 13) Tree and Hedge Removal outside bird nesting season
- 14) Lighting for Bats
- 15) Landscaping scheme
- 16) Provision of Public Art
- 17) Highway scheme implementation
- 18) Cycle route implementation
- 19) Cycle parking provision
- 20) Provision of disabled parking spaces
- 21) Prevention of surface water onto the highway
- 22) Travel Plan

3.3 Informatives (see Appendix 1 for full wording)

- 1) Statement of positive working
- 2) Rights of Way
- 3) Protection of Badgers
- 4) Protection of Bats
- 5) Protection of Network Rail Assets
- 6) Plant, machinery and equipment comprising development
- 7) Crime Prevention Advice
- 8) Highway Authority Advice – Legal Agreement
- 9) Highway Authority Advice – s278
- 10) Highway Authority Advice – Drainage
- 11) Environment Agency Advice

4. Proposed development, Site and Surroundings

Details of proposal

- 4.1 This is a full application for the proposed mixed-use redevelopment of 'Block 3', an initial phase of the wider Firepool Development Site, within Taunton town centre. The application proposes the delivery of a new four storey office building (1550sqm office), with commercial space on the ground floor (302sqm), as well as the conversion and extension of the former GWR building to form a restaurant (427sqm), and public realm works for the northern section of the proposed 'boulevard'.
- 4.2 The proposed new office building will be four storeys and is to be located to the north of the Block 3 development site presenting a gable to Trenchard Way. An active frontage will be provided in the form of a café or shop at ground floor level, located parallel to the 'boulevard' public realm area to maximise activity. Meanwhile, ancillary uses to the building including cycle stores, a Changing Places Facility, plant space and refuse storage areas will be positioned on the eastern side of the building, 2no. disabled car parking spaces and a dedicated delivery space will also be provided on site. The upper floor plan is divided into small rentable office spaces, with kitchenette spaces, and WCs also being provided on each floor.
- 4.3 In terms of materiality, the proposed building is to be predominantly a contemporary brick and zinc design. The building's 'lighter' glazed base provides contrast to the 'heavier' zinc top, while a pitched asymmetric roof is said to provide the building's prevailing distinctiveness in the street scene.
- 4.4 Located in the centre of the Block 3 site, the GWR building is to be refurbished and the ground floor is proposed to be extended outwards to provide a larger ground floor footprint that makes use of the external space to the south and west. The proposed terrace area which is created by the roof of the ground floor extension and provides an inherent sense of activity around the building and will provide users with views over the proposed boulevard. The main entrance will be through the terrace with a secondary / service entrance to the east. This side extension will only take place once an occupant is found.
- 4.5 This full application also provides the opportunity to deliver the northern most portion of the 'Boulevard' which will eventually provide a pedestrian and cycle connection between the railway station and the Somerset County Cricket Club/River Tone/town centre within a high-quality area of public realm.
- 4.6 The proposals will be initially accessed by vehicles using the existing arrangement from Canal Road although no car parking (except 2 disabled bays) are provided for the Block 3 scheme. A separate application, ref

38/21/0464, has been approved by the Planning Committee on 3 February 2022 for a new access into the wider Firepool site from Trenchard Way (to the north east of Block 3) which will connect to Canal Road and allow an alternative means of access when delivered. Block 3 does not however depend on this access to be delivered and can be brought forward using Canal Road in the interim.

- 4.7 It should be noted that Somerset West and Taunton Council is in this case both applicant and Local Planning Authority. The application is being brought forward by the Somerset West and Taunton Council after the site has lain dormant for many years and to provide some stimulus to unblock and unlock the site for development. Reference hereon to 'the Council' is as applicant/developer, the Somerset West and Taunton Council planning team referred to as the 'Local Planning Authority' or 'LPA' whose defined role is to apply national and local planning policy and assess material considerations without fear or favour in order to provide a recommendation to the Planning Committee.

Site and surroundings

- 4.8 The application site is located within Taunton town centre. It comprises an area of approximately 0.95 hectares (ha) and is arranged in a broad 'L' shape as shown on the submitted Site Location Plan.
- 4.9 The application site is bounded by Trenchard Way to the north, Canal Road to the south and currently comprises previously developed land. The railway station, including its recently constructed new multi-storey car park, lies to the north of the site on the other side of Trenchard Way. The site is bordered to the west by further vacant previously developed land which has recently been granted planning permission for a three storey Innovation Centre being developed by Somerset County Council (ref SCC/3775/2020) and is now under construction. To the east, the Firepool site is bordered by a four-storey retirement apartment building (Lock House) and further residential beyond (Firepool Lock). The site is therefore surrounded on three sides by either recently constructed or consented development. To the south of Canal Road lies the majority of the Firepool site, itself also vacant and subject to an enabling infrastructure application, 38/21/0440 which is reported to the Planning Committee in a separate report on the agenda.
- 4.10 The site, along with the adjoining land described above to the north, west and east, forms part of a wider previously developed area of land known as Firepool which has been vacant for over ten years.
- 4.11 Formerly, the wider Firepool site comprised a livestock market but this use ceased in 2008 and the site was largely cleared to facilitate its redevelopment. The Block 3 site has since been used as a site compound for construction

within the wider area, while also including the existing GWR office building which is to be retained. The existing application site is also largely fenced around the perimeter.

- 4.12 The application site is not within a Conservation Area, nor does it contain any Listed Buildings. However, there are a number of listed buildings in the wider vicinity, including Grade II Listed Taunton Station to the north and the Firepool Pumping Station to the east.

5. Planning (and enforcement) history

Reference	Description	Decision	Date
Somerset County Council Decision 4/38/08/223	Taunton Northern Inner Distributor Road (NIDR): Proposal for a new highway linking Staplegrove Road to Priory Avenue.	Approval	28/04/2008
Somerset County Council Decision 4/38/09/338	Link section of the Taunton Northern Inner Distributor Road across the Firepool Lock development site, consisting of 460m of distributor road, 130m of estate road and 160m of cycleway links.	Approval	24/09/2009
Firepool South - 38/10/0214	Up to 11,200 sq m of office floorspace, up to 4,475 sqm of hotel floorspace, up to 49 residential units together with associated car parking, landscaping, infrastructure and access on the southern part of the Firepool site adjacent to Priory Bridge Road, including the now constructed Viridor building which was later granted reserved matters approval pursuant to this outline.	Approval	30/11/2010
Wider Firepool Site - 38/15/0475	Outline planning application with some matters reserved for the redevelopment of the former cattle market site to provide up to 3500sqm of convenience retail development, up to 6000sqm of non-food development (class A1), up to 4000sqm of office (B1) or hotel (C1) use, up to 2400sqm for a cinema (D2), up to 2600sqm of food and drink establishments (A3/A4/A5) and up to 200 residential units with redevelopment of the former priory bridge road car park to provide up to 4014sqm of office (B1) and 4475sqm of office (B1) or hotel (C1) uses and a	Refusal	01/09/2016

	further 1300sqm of A3/A4/B1 (office) D2 uses with car parking, landscaping, public realm, access, highways, infrastructure works and relevant demolition.		
Wider Firepool Site - 38/17/0150 <i>'the approved St Modwen scheme'</i>	Outline planning application with some matters reserved, except for access for the NIDR only, for the redevelopment of the former cattle market site to provide up to 3500sqm of convenience retail development (Class A1), up to 6000sqm of non-food development (A1), up to 4000sqm of office (B1) or hotel (C1), up to 3900sqm of assembly/leisure (D2) and non-residential institutions (D1) (of which no more than 1500sqm shall be D1), up to 2600sqm of food and drink establishments (A3/A4/A5), and up to 200 residential units (C3) with redevelopment of the former Priory Bridge Road car park and former 84-94 Priory Bridge Road to provide up to 2964sqm of office (B1) and 5525sqm of office (B1) or hotel (C1) uses and a further 1300sqm of A3/A4/B1 (office) D2 uses with car parking, landscaping, public realm, access, (in detail for the NIDR connection) highways, infrastructure works and relevant demolition, (resubmission of 38/15/0475)	Approval	13/03/2019
38/21/0109/SCO	EIA Screening for 1,800 sqm, four storey office building and 300 space, four storey car park.	No EIA required	31/03/2021
Somerset County Council Decision SCC/3775/2020	The erection of a three storey Innovation Centre building of 2,613 sqm floor space (Use Class E) and external car parking area.	Approval	09/02/2021
38/21/0440	Demolition of Auction House and site clearance with temporary diversion of cycle and pedestrian route through the site, raising of ground to create platform formation levels, ground remediation, flood mitigation, primary foul and surface water drainage networks and connections for future sites/developments surrounding the site	Pending	

38/21/0464	Formation of vehicular access with associated works and alterations to highway	Approved	09/02/2022
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6. Environmental Impact Assessment

With respect to Block 3, a Screening Opinion was submitted to the LPA under case ref. 38/21/0109/SCO for: *“the requirement of an environmental impact assessment with the submission of a full planning application proposing a 1,800 sqm, four storey office building and 300 space, four storey car park on land at Trenchard Way, Firepool, Taunton”*. It was concluded by the LPA that the described development was not considered to be EIA development with regards to the criteria laid out in Schedule 3 of the Regulations.

It should be noted that the screened development included a multi-storey car park and therefore a higher quantum of development than the eventual scheme proposed by this full application.

7. Habitats Regulations Assessment

The site lies within the catchment area for the Somerset Moors and Levels Ramsar site. As competent authority it has been determined that a project level appropriate assessment under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 is not required as the Council is satisfied that the proposed uses as offices and other employment uses in line with Natural England Advice will not increase nutrient loadings at the catchment’s waste water treatment works. The Council is satisfied that the development is not likely to have a significant effect on the Ramsar site should permission be granted (either alone or in combination with other projects) pursuant to Regulation 63(1) of the Habitats Regulations 2017.

8. Consultation and Representations

Statutory consultees (the submitted comments are available in full on the Council’s website.

Date of Consultation: 03 November 2021

Date of revised consultation (if applicable): Limited additional consultation was undertaken with specific statutory consultees (HA, LLFA, EA)

8.1 Statutory Consultees

8.1.1 It should be noted not all statutory consultees are consulted on all planning applications. The circumstances for statutory consultation are set out in the Development Management Procedure Order. The following statutory consultees were consulted on this application:

Statutory consultee	Comments	Officer comments
Highway Authority - SCC	Initial comments made raised several concerns. Following re-consultation-	After initial comments a series of

	<p><i>“We have reviewed the highways and transportation aspects of the further information and have the following additional observations to make.</i></p> <p><i>It was previously noted that there would be a need to ensure that in any development scenario Canal Road must not become a “through route” to Trenchard Way. Planning application 38/21/0464 considered the detail of the proposed Trenchard Way vehicular access and it is understood that a planning condition has been attached to that permission which overcomes such concerns. This being the case, there is not requirement to repeat the same condition as part of any permission for this scheme.</i></p> <p><i>As presented in the latest amended scheme, and as shown in Drawing FB3-AHR- S1-XX-DR-L-08109 P07, there is now a dedicated cycle corridor through the site and this helps to overcome the earlier concerns relating to the requirements of the LTN 1/20 cycle scheme guidance. The proposal will provide an alternative “through” cycle route and would avoid the highly trafficked pedestrianised areas which will be located immediately to the west of the proposed office building. The implementation of any amendments within the highway along Trenchard Way will need to be secured as part of an appropriate highway agreement, and it is recommended that this requirement is secured by a planning condition.</i></p> <p><i>The future status of Canal Road has been discussed, and it is clear that the preferred ultimate scenario is that the road is “stopped up” and the route is maintained by a private management company as part of the overall Firepool master plan development. However, the project team has explained that there may need to be an interim scenario where the existing Canal</i></p>	<p>meetings with the Highway Authority took place that led to amended plans that resolved those issues.</p> <p>The suggested conditions are imposed.</p>
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	<p><i>Road remains adopted highway and the associated works are also adopted. The extent of these areas have now been shown in Jubb Drawing 131 T3. As previously mentioned, this would add further complexity and another level of process, with the highway authority having to undertake a comprehensive design check and highway adoption process at a later date (and before the site access could be used). This same highway layout will then be “stopped up” at a later date, and that process will need to be scheduled to suit the delivery of the Trenchard Way vehicular access and any other Firepool projects that could have an impact on the use of Canal Road. It is also noted that there are retaining walls now proposed to be constructed within the highway, and these will be subject to the Approval in Principle (AiP) processes. A planning condition is recommended to secure the design check and adoption process.</i></p> <p><i>The site servicing and disabled parking arrangements have been discussed with the applicant’s team, and there is no objection to the layout now presented.</i></p> <p><i>The scheme does require that the existing Bridleway is diverted as part of the construction phase, however, it is assumed that the appropriate advice has been provided by our Public Rights of Way colleagues.</i></p> <p><i>Whilst the highway authority now raises no objection to the planning application, should planning permission be granted it is recommended that the following conditions are attached”.</i></p>	
<p>National Highways</p>	<p>No objection – “We have reviewed the submitted Transport Statement dated October 2021 together with the Transport Assessment submitted in support of the 2019 permission (ref: 38/17/0150). Based on our assessment the application will result in a net decrease in traffic generated by the Block 3</p>	<p>No action required.</p>

	<p>site over that previously consented under the 38/17/0150 permission. As such it is accepted that the development at Block 3 is unlikely to result in an adverse impact on the safe operation of the strategic road network, in this case M5 Junction 25”.</p>	
Environment Agency	<p>An initial objection was raised due to the lack of a Flood Risk Assessment. <i>“An acceptable FRA is vital to making informed planning decisions. In its absence, the flood risks posed by the development are unknown. This is sufficient reason for refusing planning permission”.</i></p> <p>Upon submission of an FRA the EA commented:</p> <p><i>“Provided the Local Planning Authority (LPA) is satisfied the requirements of the Sequential Test under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) are met, and provided the temporary drainage infrastructure for this site has been included within long term drainage strategy for the overall site, the Environment Agency can now WITHDRAW its earlier objection, in principle, to the proposed development, subject to the following conditions being included within the Decision Notice”.</i></p> <p><i>“For the applicant’s information I can confirm that based on the environmental sensitivity of the site, its past uses and ground conditions reported in the supporting material we don’t wish to make detailed comments relating to land contamination”.</i></p>	<p>The conditions referred to in the final EA response have been imposed.</p> <p>The matter of the sequential test is discussed at para 12.80.</p>
Wessex Water	No comments received.	
Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) - SCC	No comments received.	
Canal and River Trust	No comments received.	
Historic England	<p><u>“Significance</u> <i>Taunton is the historic county town and one of major urban centres in Somerset. It sits within a shallow dip, encircled by Brendon Hills to the west, Quantock Hills to the North, the Somerset levels to the east and Blackdown Hills AONB to the south. This peculiar topographical position has significantly influenced the historic</i></p>	<p>Assessment of the proposal’s impact on heritage assets is given from para 12.50</p>

development of the town, whose urban growth is contained within its basin and surrounded by a predominantly rural landscape.

This contained development is also behind the distinctive and aesthetically pleasing townscape identity in long views from the surrounding ridges.

Taunton's centre and skyline is defined by the church towers of St James, St Mary Magdalene and St George's and the spire of St John's. Because of their intrinsic historic and architectural interest, as well as their group and communal value, those churches are highly designated buildings and Taunton's skyline is an important aspect of these churches' setting, contributing both to their significance and their visual and historical appreciation.

Consequently, the ability to view these competing church towers and spire from longer ranged views, which have formed a characteristic of the settlement's skyline, is an important part also of their collective significance.

Impact of the proposals

The application seeks permission for the erection of a four storey office building and associated landscaping within Block 3 of the Firepool site, which is an allocated site.

Although there are no designated heritage assets on site, the highly designated assets outlined above might be impacted by the development through their setting, which greatly contributes to their significance.

National Planning Policy Framework sets out in Paragraph 194 that the LPA should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage asset affected, including the contribution made by their setting.

We are aware that a Master Plan for the Firepool site is currently been revised. We would have expected this proposal to come forward once that exercise is complete and submitted as part of the application supporting information. We would expect it to include: a thorough assessment of Taunton's key views in and from the town, an analysis of the key sightlines towards the designated heritage assets throughout the development

	<p><i>and their contribution to the significance of the designated heritage assets along the lines outlined above. It should also include the impact of the proposed development on that significance.</i></p> <p><i>Due to the lack of these important information, we are not able to provide you with detailed comments on the submitted proposals but we would recommend that you satisfy yourself that the above requirements are met.</i></p> <p><u><i>Recommendation</i></u></p> <p><i>Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. We consider that the issues and safeguards outlined in our advice need to be addressed in order for the application to meet the requirements of paragraphs 194 of the NPPF.</i></p> <p><i>In determining this application you should bear in mind the statutory duty of section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings or their setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess and section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to determine planning applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.</i></p> <p><i>Your authority should take these representations into account and seek amendments, safeguards or further information as set out in our advice. If there are any material changes to the proposals, or you would like further advice, please contact us”.</i></p>	
Natural England	No comments to make.	Noted, no action required.
Network Rail	<p><i>“No objection in principle to the above proposal but due to the proposal being next to Network Rail land and our infrastructure and to ensure that no part of the development adversely impacts the safety, operation and integrity of the operational railway we have included asset protection comments which the applicant is strongly recommended to action should the proposal be granted planning permission”.</i> Comments to be added as Informative Note related to Drainage,</p>	<p>These precautionary comments are noted and the site is considered far enough away as to not require further action at this time.</p>

	Ground Levels, Foundations, Ground Disturbance, Plant, Scaffolding and Cranes, and Access to Railway.	Informative Note to be added.
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8.2 Non-Statutory Consultees

Non-Statutory consultee	Comments	Officer comments
SWT Conservation Officer	<p><u>Proposals</u> <i>Planning permission is sought for erection of a four-storey office building with associated landscaping within Block 3 of the Firepool site. The Master Plan for the Firepool site is currently being revised and this application is being brought forward prior to the completion of the masterplan.</i></p> <p><u>Significance</u> <i>The significance of Taunton's centre and skyline is defined by the church towers of St James, St Mary Magdalene and St George's and the spire of St John's. The churches are high grade designated heritage assets and the church of St Mary Magdalene and St James lie within the conservation area of St Mary and St James while the Church of St John lies within the conservation area of Park Street and Wellington Road.</i></p> <p><u>Policy</u> General duty as respects listed buildings in exercise of planning functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>In considering whether to grant planning permission for development Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 the Local Authority shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses</i> <p>General duty as respects conservation areas in exercise of planning functions</p>	Assessment of the proposal's impact on heritage assets is given from para 12.50

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In considering whether to grant planning permission for development Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 the Local Authority special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area</i> <p><i>NPPF para 194</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>194. In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance.</i> <p><u><i>Information requested</i></u></p> <p><i>Due to the significance of the church towers and their appearance and contribution to Taunton's skyline further information has been requested by Historic England in accordance with para 194 of the NPPF. A heritage impact assessment and an understanding of the impact of the development on key views some of which may be far reaching should be provided. Nb the Councils general duty as above. The Panoramic Viewpoints documents is incomplete and does not include some of the far-reaching views that would best demonstrate the impact of the development on the skyline and heritage assets. The town centre viewpoints should be on named locations ie viewpoint 1 is at high level but potentially could be on a popular throughfare; the viewpoint has not identified where it was taken from. The document demonstrates before and after pictures on some viewpoints but not all. Viewpoint 1 is a telling impact on the significance and harm to the church tower and the Taunton skyline. Viewpoint 2 wireframe would be better served without the hoardings. Viewpoints 7-11 and 13-21 are incomplete".</i></p>	
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SW Heritage Trust	<p><i>“The submitted Heritage Statement and archaeological WSI are sufficient to enable the significance of the archaeology on the site to be understood”. Condition suggested.</i></p>	<p>Noted, condition imposed.</p>
SWT Green Infrastructure Officer	<p><i>“Broadly, the design changes answer most of my previous comments, and I think that the current layout works much better. I am writing here a few comments for further consideration:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• The new proposal provides a mixture of raised and flush planters that allows collecting rainwater. I am a bit concerned that the amount of soft landscaping is still relatively low compared with site size.</i> <i>• Canal Road is currently dominated by hardscaping and lacks natural green elements. However, it was mentioned that trees and green elements will be considered as part of future applications.</i> <i>• The cycleway goes along the ramp and east to the new building, and it is now separate from pedestrians' footpaths and creates a safer environment for both (pedestrians and cyclists) than previously. The ramp gradient is pretty low (less than 1:20) and should be comfortable to cycle. However, I think that adding a gully at the edge of the staircase is important in order to create another cycling route. It would probably be used by cyclists who come to the site or by 'slow' cyclists who might prefer not to use the ramp. In a strategic view, adding more options for cyclists is an important measure to encourage active travel mode.</i> <i>• The new design omits the lift and replaces its area with planting and trees. Although it increases the soft landscaping area it might harm people with disabilities that now need to use the ramp in order to get from the lower to the upper part of the site. I think the design should consider the lift in a different location.</i> 	<p>These comments are noted and are assessed in the Design, Layout and Equalities section starting at para 12.24.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The amended plan reduces the width of the eastern stairs and expands the gallery adjacent to the GWR building, which creates an attractive sitting area and viewpoint. But I think that the multiplicity of stairs might be confusing and doesn't create a clear hierarchy of walking routes. I would prefer one wide staircase that creates a clear connection between the upper area and the future boulevard".</i> 	
<p>SWT Placemaking Officer</p>	<p><u><i>Building Design</i></u> - <i>The relocated substation is a slight improvement although allowing parking in front of this on Trenchard Way will visually detract from this improvement and may hinder the provision of landscaping due to visibility splays. There are plenty of substations where direct access to the front of the unit does not occur. The design of the office block building is supported although there are still concerns relating to the rear elevation which will provide no natural surveillance of the public realm at ground floor. This, together with the shielding from the substation will make this area an unsafe and unwelcoming environment. The revised GWR building is an attractive feature and will work well without the additional floor. The glazed extension and terrace is supported and works well with changes in level.</i></p> <p><u><i>Public Realm</i></u> <i>There are still concerns at the lack of an integrated route along the boulevard for pedestrians, cyclists and other users with mobility and disability issues. It has not been demonstrated what options have been explored for achieving this. Whilst the design of the previous scheme which included a lift was a concern (due to lack of surveillance of the entrance to the lift and lack of transparency of the structure), this could have been overcome. To omit the lift in this scheme will cause people with mobility a significant detour. It is not accepted that the provision of regularly spaced seats along this route is adequate</i></p>	<p>These comments are noted and are assessed in the Design, Layout and Equalities section starting at para 12.24.</p>

	<p><i>compensation for a well-designed proposal that caters for all users.</i></p> <p><i>There is concern at the proposed cycle route to the rear of the office building. Cycle movement would be re-routed across the main access point to the proposed future MSC. This would also be a conflict with the proposed blue badge parking spaces (which are shown outside the red line boundary of this application). The provision of 3 sets of steps is visually confusing and could be better provided for in one wider set of steps providing a direct link between the station and the town centre.</i></p> <p><i>There remains concerns that the public realm is not being considered holistically across the entire length of the boulevard. By designing small sections in a piecemeal fashion risks a disjointed route. As it is the crossing with Canal Road does not appear to have been considered as a nodal point with pedestrian priority. The different colour of paving surfaces in their serpentine design will also appear visually confusing and not aiding direct access and movement.</i></p> <p><i>There also remains a concerns over the use of tree planters. Trees in this type of environment are rarely successful and the surface in the above ground planter is not easy to maintain and often ends up acting as an informal litter bin.</i></p> <p><i>It would be useful if thought could be given to public art as an integral part of the public realm proposals. It would also be useful to consider the possible provision of power points in the public realm to enable such facilities as pop up kiosks/ market stalls”.</i></p>	
<p>SWT Environmental Health</p>	<p><i>“The proposal is to extend and convert an existing building to a restaurant, to erect a new office/commercial building on the western part of the site and for landscaping and public access paths.</i></p> <p>Noise.</p> <p><i>A report was provided with the application</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Firepool, Taunton Block 3. Noise Survey Report 16th April 2021. Ion Acoustics</i> 	<p>Noted, a condition referring to unexpected contamination is imposed.</p> <p>The EA has responded positively to the suggested it</p>

	<p><i>The report included details of a noise survey to determine existing levels on site, which found fairly high levels close to the road. An assessment was made of the potential impact on both residential and office use. It concluded that for residential use improved façade sound insulation would be required for dwellings close to the road. For office use sufficient sound insulation would be provided with standard double-glazed windows.</i></p> <p><i>As this development is for office/commercial uses the use standard double-glazed windows would be acceptable. If any future proposals include residential use the developer should be required to carry out an additional assessment to determine the level of sound insulation that would be required.</i></p> <p>Ground Contamination</p> <p><i>The information provided confirms that there are no significant risks to future users of the site or to controlled waters and there is no need for any remedial works. However, the Report recommends keeping a watching brief which is good practice. It is recommended that the Environment Agency also review the information regarding any concerns about controlled waters.</i></p> <p><i>The information provided on contamination includes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Block 3, Firepool Taunton. Ground Condition Assessment Report. July 2021. Jubb Consulting Engineers Ltd</i> <p><i>The Report includes a review of previous investigations and reports carried out for this site and assesses possible risks.</i></p> <p>Risks to Human Health</p> <p><i>Samples were tested for a range of possible contaminants and compared to Generic Assessment Criteria for Public Open Spaces. The report states that all samples were below the relevant thresholds other than minor exceedances that were linked to isolated fragments of tarmacadam and coal in the ground and therefore were removed as outliers. The Report concludes that “The resulting risks to human health from site</i></p>	<p>reviews the approach to contamination remediation with respect to controlled waters.</p>
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	<p><i>soils in the proposed development are considered to be low and as such no specific remediation measures are required”.</i></p> <p>Ground Gas <i>Monitoring was carried out and the report states that “based on these results no specific gas protection measures would be required”. Note that gas protection measures are part of the Building Regulations and should be agreed and signed off as part of the Building Control process.</i></p> <p>Asbestos <i>Based on the site investigation the report noted that asbestos is unlikely to be present or pose a significant risk, however, a watching brief should be kept at the site.</i></p> <p>Risk to controlled waters <i>Monitoring and sampling was carried out and the report concluded that no significant leachate or groundwater contamination had been encountered and that significant impacts have not been identified, and risk to controlled waters are low.</i> <i>The report does state that</i> <i>“A watching brief should be maintained during demolition and construction phases and any future significant earthworks, in particular in the area underlain by made ground, to ensure any unexpected contamination is dealt with correctly”</i> <i>This is good practice and should be in place throughout the development.”</i></p>	
<p>SCC Ecologist</p>	<p><i>“The application is located within the catchment of the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site. Following recent advice from Natural England this application may now require a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA). However, further to discussions with Natural England, the proposed application, with associated low levels of Phosphate production, is unlikely to add significantly to nutrient loading on the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site; therefore a Likely Significant Effect under The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (and as amended by The Conservation of</i></p>	<p>Noted, Conditions and Informatives imposed.</p>

	<p><i>Habitats and Species (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019) can be ruled out. The application site lies within Band C of the Bat Consultation Zone for the Hestercombe House SAC which is designated for its lesser horseshoe bat feature. However, the proposed development is highly unlikely to have an effect on lesser horseshoe bats and therefore I do not propose to carry out a Habitats Regulations Assessment for the application.</i></p> <p><i>A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of the application site was carried out in April 2021 by Cotswold Wildlife Surveys updating historic site protected species survey results.</i></p> <p>Bats: <i>Emergence surveys on the building found likely absence of roosting bats but identified bats commuting and foraging around the site.</i></p> <p>Badgers: <i>Commuting opportunities are associated with the site.</i></p> <p>Birds: <i>Nesting bird habitat was identified associated with the building and vegetation on site”.</i></p> <p>Conditions and Informative proposed relating to bats, small mammals, badgers, birds, a LEMP and biodiversity net gain.</p>	
SWT Tree Officer	Initial comments relating to the apparent use of tree planters and the impact on establishing trees of a certain size.	Comments referred back to the applicant, comments incorporated into amended plans.
SCC Rights of Way	Any proposed works must not encroach onto the width of the PROW (public bridleway), ref T33/21. Health and safety should be considered. Informative suggested.	Informative added.
SWT Economic Development	<i>“This application will develop space for a range of employment uses at a key development site near the centre of Taunton and will provide amenities to support other proposed development in the Firepool area. As such the Economic</i>	No action required.

	<i>Regeneration team of the Council is supportive”.</i>	
Crime Prevention Officer – Avon and Somerset Police	No objection subject to comments – perimeter treatment, defensible spaces, layout and surveillance, bollards, street furniture, glazed curtain walling, climbing aids, lighting, parking, landscaping, cycle/refuse stores, doorsets, windows, alarms, CCTV, access controls and Secured by Design accreditation.	These comments have been discussed with the applicant and amendments have been made. Informative added.
Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service	Comments relating to means of escape and access and facilities for the service and how this is set out in the Buildings Regulations provisions.	For information – No action required.

8.3 Local representation

8.3.1 This application was publicised by 96 letters of notification to neighbouring properties and 6 site notices were displayed around the periphery of the wider Firepool site on the 11th November 2021.

8.3.2 No representations of support or objection have been received from members of the public.

8.3.3 The application was referred to the Council’s Equalities Working Group. The Case Officer also approached the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Taunton Disability Action Group, given the area of public realm proposed. Commentary on this collective input is contained with the section on Design and Equalities at para 12.24 onwards.

8.3.4 The Case Officer also approached Taunton Area Cycling Campaign (TACC). TACC confirmed support for the proposed cycle and wheeled ramped link, which will provide a link into Firepool destinations and between the Station and Town Centre. Some detailed comments were made regarding gradient, visibility, surfacing and segregation, which have been considered. See more commentary at para 12.24 onwards.

9. Relevant planning policies and Guidance

9.1 Section 70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as amended ("the 1990 Act"), requires that in determining any planning application regard is to be had to the provisions of the Development Plan, so far as is material to the application and to any other material planning considerations. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) ("the 2004 Act") requires that planning applications should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The site lies in the former Taunton Deane area. The Development Plan

comprises the Taunton Deane Core Strategy (2012), the Taunton Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (SADMP) (2016), the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (2008), Somerset Minerals Local Plan (2015), and Somerset Waste Core Strategy (2013).

- 9.2 Both the Taunton Deane Core Strategy and the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032 are currently being reviewed and the Council undertook public consultation in January 2020 on the Council's issues and options report. Since then the Government has announced proposals for the local government reorganisation and regulations are currently going through Parliament with a new unitary authority for Somerset to be created from 1 April 2023. The work undertaken towards a new local plan will feed into the requirement to produce a Local Plan covering the new authority.
- 9.3 Relevant policies of the development plan in the assessment of this application are listed below.

Core Strategy 2012

SD1 - Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
CP1 - Climate Change
CP2 - Economy
CP3 - Town and other Centres
CP5 - Inclusive Communities
CP6 - Transport and Accessibility
CP7 - Infrastructure
CP8 - Environment
SP1 - Sustainable Development Locations
SP2 - Realising the Vision for Taunton
DM1 - General Requirements
DM4 - Design
DM5 - Use of Resources and Sustainable Design

Site Allocations and Development Management Plan 2016

TC4 - Primary Shopping Areas
C4 - Protection of community facilities
C6 - Accessible facilities
A1 - Parking
A2 - Travel Planning
A3 - Cycle network
I4 - Water Infrastructure
ENV1 - Protection of trees, woodland, orchards and hedgerows
ENV2 - Tree Planting within New Developments
ENV4 - Archaeology
ENV5 - Development in the Vicinity of rivers and canals
D1 - Taunton's skyline
D7 - Design Quality
D8 - Safety
D9 - A co-ordinated approach to development and highway planning
D13 - Public Art

Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan 2008

Fp1 - Riverside - Development content

Fp2 - Riverside - Transport measures

Tr1 – Multi-storey car parks

Tr2 – Parking in New Development

Tr3 – Smarter Choices

Tr4 – Travel Plans

Tr5 – Car Sharing

Tr6 – Developer Contributions to Transport

Tr10 – Cycle Schemes

F1 – Development in the Floodplain

ED1 – Design

ED2 – Public Art

ED3 – Mixed Use

ED4 – Density

ED5 – Combating Climate Change through New Development

ED6 – Off-site Public Realm Enhancements

TS1 – Training & Skills

IM1 – Priorities for Developer Funding

Supplementary Planning Documents

Taunton Town Centre Design Code

Public Realm Design Guide for the Garden Town, December 2021

District Wide Design Guide, December 2021

Other relevant policy documents

Somerset West and Taunton Council's Climate Positive Planning: Interim Guidance Statement on Planning for the Climate Emergency (February 2021)

Neighbourhood Plans

There is no made Neighbourhood Plan for the area

The National Planning Policy Framework

The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), last update July 2021 sets the Governments planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied.

Relevant Chapters of the NPPF include:

2. Achieving sustainable development

3. Decision-making

5. Delivering a sufficient supply of homes

6. Building a strong, competitive economy

7. Ensuring the vitality of town centres

8. Promoting healthy and safe communities

9. Promoting sustainable transport

11. Making effective use of land

12. Achieving well-designed places

14. Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change

15. Conserving and enhancing the natural environment
16. Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

10. Conclusion on Development Plan

- 10.1 To properly perform the S38(6) duty the LPA has to establish whether or not the proposed development accords with the development plan as a whole. This needs to be done even if development plan policies "pull in different directions", i.e. some may support a proposal, others may not. The LPA is required to assess the proposal against the potentially competing policies and then decide whether in the light of the whole plan the proposal does or does not accord with it. In these circumstances, the Officer Report should determine the relative importance of the policy, the extent of any breach and how firmly the policy favours or set its face against such a proposal.
- 10.2 There are specific policies in the Core Strategy (CP3) Taunton Area Action Plan (Fp1) that support the development of the Firepool site, making it a strategic priority for the Council, given its transformative impacts on the Town Centre and delivery of the Garden Town objectives.
- 10.3 This report assesses the material planning considerations and representations before reaching a conclusion on adherence with the development plan as a whole.

11. Local Finance Considerations

Community Infrastructure Levy

The creation of retail floor space (old use classes A1-A5 inc.) is CIL liable, however the application is for retail development in Taunton Town Centre where the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is £0 per square metre. Based on current rates, there would not be a CIL receipt for this development.

12. Material Planning Considerations

- 12.1 The main planning issues relevant in the assessment of this application are as follows:
 - The principle of development
 - Prematurity – development in advance of a Masterplan
 - Design and layout
 - The public realm and equalities
 - Active travel, access and highway safety
 - Technical Assessments – Flood Risk, Heritage
 - The impact on neighbouring residential amenity

Principle of Development

- 12.1. Delivering the redevelopment of the Firepool site is one of the Council's key corporate priorities. This application is one of three recent applications and is another important first steps towards achieving that objective.
- 12.2. Planning Committee approved in February 2022 the application for an access off Trenchard Way and this in time will become the principal means of access for vehicular traffic relieving Canal Road.
- 12.3. The third application for enabling works, ground raising, and drainage infrastructure is subject to a separate report also on the agenda for the 17 March 2022 Planning Committee.
- 12.4. Delivering the redevelopment of the Firepool site is one of the Council's key corporate priorities and the planning application proposals is an important step towards achieving that objective. The Firepool site has been vacant for over a decade and there is very strong support within the local community for it to be redeveloped. The proposed development, as one of the first phases of Firepool, therefore represents a significant opportunity within a highly accessible and sustainable location.
- 12.5. The redevelopment of the application site which forms part of a key brownfield site (Firepool) within Taunton's town centre, is supported by the Development Plan and is an important part of its strategy for Taunton. The clear focus of long-established national and local planning policy is to secure sustainable patterns of redevelopment and regeneration through the efficient use of previously developed urban land and through concentrating development in accessible locations. Paragraph 119 of the NPPF states that local planning authorities should adopt a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously developed or 'brownfield' land. Paragraph 120 states that planning decisions should give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for development needs.
- 12.6. The Development Plan echoes the rhetoric of the above. The Core Strategy (Policy SP1) makes it clear that the Taunton urban area will remain the strategic focus for growth and will be the focal point for new development. It states that priority has been given to the regeneration and expansion of the town centre, with a number of strategic sites allocated in the adopted Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (2008). The SADMP proposals map defines the town centre area as including Firepool, but the Primary Shopping Area defines the centre for retail purposes and Firepool is beyond this. Meanwhile, SADMP Policy DM1 seeks to ensure new development makes the most effective and efficient use of land, giving preference to the recycling of previously developed (brownfield) land. It also sets out the scale of additional office and retail space that the vision for Taunton will require.

- 12.7. Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy states that any proposal for main town centre uses (such as those proposed) will be assessed sequentially and also that on the edge of centre or out of centre sites, such uses above 500sqm must undertake an impact assessment. Only the office building is caught by this threshold.
- 12.8. The SADMP uses Policy TC4 to set the Primary Shopping Area (PSA) and describes how this sets requirements for sequential test and impact assessment. Policy TC5 then essentially sets out the criteria for qualifying developments to fulfil, including in relation to sequential test and impact assessment, but other aspects as well.
- 12.9. These policies are generic and cater for generally speculative or windfall type proposals, but in the case of Firepool the site is allocated for the uses proposed and at significantly greater floor area than the fraction of that proposed by this portion of the wider site. There is also an extant permission which carries weight. In particular the retail supermarket which would have laid on the Block 3 area with an arguably transformative impact on the town centre, adjudged to be acceptable. The future intentions regarding the appropriate quantum of retail on the wider site will need assessing at the Masterplan stage. In line with Policy TCS the Firepool site is a long-term commitment of the Council for planned investment and as an allocated site all policies will have been mindful of its impact on the town centre, both positive and negative. As such one could argue a need for the application of the sequential test and impact assessment but given the relatively small floor area and the fact high quality employment, leisure and residential developments near transport hubs like railway stations is generally sequentially preferable to those further away, and so in reality, what would such assessments tell us that would or should change the approach to Firepool set out in the Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP) for example?
- 12.10. The AAP is essentially a delivery plan. It includes Firepool as one of its main proposals enshrined in Policy Fp1 where new offices, retailing and leisure uses are promoted alongside a boulevard linking the railway station with the River Tone and the town centre and two multi-storey car parks (including one for rail users).
- 12.11. In detail Policy Fp1 states that development at Firepool will provide:
- a) at least 47,000 sq m (net) office space
 - b) approximately 8,000 sq m gross of additional retail and leisure floorspace, of which 4,000 sq m gross should be convenience retailing
 - c) approximately 400 dwellings, including 25% affordable housing
 - d) a 500-space multi-storey car park (screened with single aspect development where it adjoins public space)
 - e) a 3- or 4-star hotel with at least 100 bedrooms
 - f) primary healthcare facilities

- g) the relocation of the Produce Market within the town centre
- h) a 'boulevard' linking the railway station with the River Tone and Priory Bridge Road
- i) public conveniences close to public parking and the River Tone, to replace the existing facilities at Canal Road and Priory Bridge Road
- j) potential for active street level uses at locations shown on the Proposals Map
- k) high quality riverside promenades
- l) a contribution towards public art at 0.3% of construction cost

- 12.12 This application is seeking to deliver a part of this Firepool proposal, broadly in accordance with the AAP. Clearly all the requirements cannot be provided within just a small part of the site. The application does propose a new office building, with café on the ground floor, as well as a bar/restaurant all at a scale which is consistent with the AAP proposals for the wider site.
- 12.13 The AAP envisages a 'boulevard' linking the railway station (to the north) with the River Tone and Priory Bridge Road and the application proposals include the first section of this boulevard. The AAP considers that 4-5 storey buildings would be acceptable in this location which the application proposals are consistent with.
- 12.14 The uses and scale of uses proposed, being offices, café and a bar/restaurant are entirely consistent with what the Development Plan policies allow and propose within the Town Centre Boundary, within which the application site lies.
- 12.15 The proposed uses fall into the Class E of the Use Classes Order (the planning regulations that assign a 'planning use' to each building or piece of land and govern what that building or land can change to without the need for planning permission but in line with certain criteria). This is a recently broadened use class that now amalgamates the previously separate Commercial, Business and Service uses. What this means in practice is that whilst the ground floor area of the office building and the GWR Goods Office are described as for food and beverage or retail, they could change between office, medical service, retail, food and drink, or use whereby services are offered to visiting members of the public, i.e. bank, insurance uses for example, without need for a planning application.
- 12.16 Importantly under the Use Classes Order there is also the potential permitted change from Class E to Class C3, which is dwelling houses, via a prior approval process, a mixed use and up to 2 flats, and/or a state funded school. The proposed Class E floorspace could be changed to residential under Class MA after 2 years of use as Class E and after being vacant for 3 months, up to a floor area of 1500sqm. In consideration of this the only counter is to formally withdraw permitted development rights so the use stays as office, retail, café as part of Class E and a planning application is required to change to anything else. Otherwise one must rely on Class MA or any subsequent amendment to govern what the buildings could otherwise turn into as is the case currently across the rest of the district.

12.17 In consideration of the merits of changing the GWR building and/or office block, with ground floor retail to residential or part thereof, it is felt withdrawing the right to change is the correct thing to do, to allow a future application to assess the practicalities (living standards, refuse storage, car parking, amenity space) plus the impacts on the vitality of the Block 3 development and to allow the wider picture to emerge via the Masterplan process.

Prematurity – Development in advance of Masterplan

12.18 The revised NPPF provides policy support for the application proposals. In addition to the presumption in favour of sustainable development, the following paragraphs are pertinent:

- Paragraph 38 states that decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.
- Paragraph 80 states that significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity.
- Paragraph 118 states that planning decisions should give substantial weight to the value of reusing brownfield land within settlements and promote and support the development of under-utilised land and buildings.

12.19 While the application proposals are broadly consistent with the AAP, planning permissions have previously been granted for development on the Firepool site which was perceived to be in conflict with the AAP policies due to the change in market conditions and other material considerations. Outline planning permission (LPA Ref:38/17/0150) was granted on 13 March 2019 for a retail-led, mixed-use redevelopment of the site. The officer report to committee advised that *“it is accepted that the mix and quantum of uses identified in Policy FP1 would be difficult to deliver in the current market”* and *“it would be prudent when determining an application that is not fully in accordance with the development plan to consider whether the adverse impacts of granting permission would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. It is also necessary to consider whether there are material considerations which warrant a deviation from the adopted development plan policies”*. The report concluded that the benefits of granting planning permission outweighed the conflict with the AAP.

12.20 A new masterplan and revised mix of uses for the wider Firepool site is being prepared and it is understood the Council’s objective is to commence development, starting with the application site, later this year. Whilst ideally this application would have waited to be informed by a site wide Masterplan the LPA is required to determine applications on their own merits.

12.21 If, due to the way the development has been designed, it later causes a constraint to development potential, then any financial risk in this ‘cart before the horse’ approach lies with the applicant. This will ultimately only be known post-Masterplan when planning applications are submitted for assessment. The previous approval for the St Modwen scheme was a comprehensive

development led by a proposed final design where one knew where buildings were going to be located, trees planted, and roads constructed.

- 12.22 Albeit not ideal, the LPA must therefore proceed on the basis that this planning application should be treated on its merits and on the balance of considerations having regard to the Development Plan, the weight that can be given to it, and all material considerations including national policy. Significant weight should be given to the economic benefits, value of re-using brownfield land, the high quality of the design proposed and that the applications will seemingly facilitate the actual delivery of development on a site that has lain vacant for over a decade.
- 12.23 It is considered that the development complies with the Development Plan when taken as a whole.

Design, the public realm and equalities

- 12.24 A Taunton Town Centre Design Code SPD was prepared to complement the policies in the Town Centre Area Action Plan. The SPD explains that it builds on previous design studies such as the Taunton Design Code (2004) to create distinct character areas whilst strengthening design linkages within the town centre as a whole. It identifies design principles for the Fp1 area as follows:
- a) The priority area for office and retail use is in the west of the area, focused along the route from the station to the riverfront and along Priory Bridge Road. This area will be predominantly commercial in character but must incorporate a mix of residential, retail, leisure and community activity.
 - b) The eastern sector will be predominantly residential in character but must incorporate a mix of employment, retail and leisure activity.
 - c) Strategic public spaces should be provided at the station, the southern end of the boulevard and at Firepool Weir. The riverside promenade will form a key public realm resource.
 - d) The development will enhance the setting of and views to the Pump House listed building and retain and frame views towards Taunton's church towers from the station and boulevard.
 - e) Imaginative contemporary design will be encouraged.
- 12.25 The application contains a detailed Design and Access Statement which explains the design evolution and how it would sit within the wider emerging Masterplan. It is considered, as far as is possible from the limited extent of this particular application that the requirements of the Town Centre Design Code referenced above has been met.
- 12.26 Policy ED1 provides overarching policy guidance on design, seeking appropriate and sensitive responses to a site's context. However, the Garden Town District Wide Design and Public Realm Guide SPD's provide more focused design criteria with relevance to the development site. The Public Realm Design Guide seeks to raise the standard of the public realm and streetworks within the Taunton Garden Town. Extensive discussions have taken place to ensure the boulevard meets all expectations and meets the needs of all users as far as is reasonably possible.

- 12.27 The proposal has also been assessed by Design Review Panel and more recently the Council's Quality Review Panel and these reviews have positively influenced the design. The QRP report from September 2021 is attached as Appendix 2. The QRP assessed the emerging Masterplan and detailed plans for Block 3 as part of an iterative process. QRP opined "*The panel is encouraged by the thought that has gone into the detail design for Block 3. The Block's identity and purpose are clear and expects that as the scheme progresses, the applicant will apply an equivalent level of thoughtful contextual design to the remaining blocks*". Comments relating to the wider boulevard referred to creating an identity, considering more greenery over a predominantly hard paved area, the character and scale of the public realm spaces, use of the term 'boulevard', inclusive design and considering onward connections beyond the site boundaries. The panel also made comment on cycling – "*Given the scale and location, the panel anticipates this site will be busy and suggests that cyclists and pedestrians are separated on selected key routes to ensure everyone can move through it with ease and enjoyment*".
- 12.28 These comments provided a focus for evaluating the public realm, mindful this is a small area compared to the remainder of the boulevard still to come forward. Cycling segregation has been thoroughly considered, and more greenery included. Overall, as can be seen, the Panel recognised the design quality. Concerns remain however from the Council's Placemaking Officer.
- 12.29 With regards to the office building the intention has been to provide an attractive and emblematic introduction to the architectural style of the rest of the Firepool Site, with design references to the wider site incorporated. It also complements the approved Innovation Centre to create uniformity, despite the deferent commissioners. There have been no concerns raised over this building in elevational terms; its height and consequential townscape/heritage impact is assessed at para 12.50 onwards.
- 12.30 One significant advantage of this scheme is the retention of the GWR Goods office (a non-designated heritage asset) and the proposal to enrich the building's existing character, by appropriately updating its function and appearance to foster a vibrant and attractive restaurant/bar. It is perhaps worth reflecting on the fact under the 'approved St Modwen scheme', ref 38/17/0150 (which was approved within the last 3 years) the Block 3 area was to receive a supermarket with associated surface level car park, and this would have required the GWR building to have been demolished. In the wider discussion regarding accessibility, public realm and the overall quality of the scheme this fact alone should be given weight.
- 12.31 This building was to receive a rooftop extension, but that was withdrawn due to different design opinions and the fact it impacted on useable floorspace in the building when taking into account the additional fire safety elements required from installing a third floor. The side extension and first floor terrace would contribute significantly to the overall scheme; however they will only be built as and when a tenant is secured.

- 12.32 An Energy and Sustainability Statement has been submitted detailing how the development meets the relevant policy criteria, including the Climate Positive Planning guidance (adopted February 2021), Sustainability Checklist and the requirements of Policy DM5 of the Core Strategy. The development proposals have been designed to be energy efficient, with very low levels of predicted energy use. As a new building, the office building is said to achieve 33.3% carbon reductions through a range of means including the provision of a PV array and the use of Air Source Heat Pumps. Meanwhile the existing GWR building has been updated to improve its energy efficiency but without impacting the heritage value of the building. However, the new elements of the GWR building have taken the opportunity to incorporate the same very high fabric standards as the office building. In this vein the development proposals are considered to be policy compliant, and representative of the sustainable principles encouraged within the 'Climate Positive Planning' guidance document.
- 12.33 The third aspect of the proposal is the northern portion of the Boulevard, an important linkage and intended area of public realm through the entire Firepool site and one of the fundamental facets of the allocation. It is the public realm that has attracted most comment and attention. The issues can be identified as concerning green infrastructure, use of materials, and accessibility. The next paragraphs assess these different aspects of the public realm.
- 12.34 In terms of green infrastructure there are very few, if any, trees, or indeed any greenery, of any significance in the Block 3 area. Soft and hard landscape plans have been submitted to demonstrate the proposed landscaping strategy for the site focused on the boulevard.
- 12.35 Policy ENV2 seeks to encourage the planting of new trees and circa 30 trees plus other shrub planting is proposed. Concerns have been raised about the use of some raised planters but these are bottomless and the raised walls allow the opportunity for seating and a definition of the space. They also present a colour contrast to the floor paving which aids those with visual impairments to navigate the space.
- 12.36 Policy DM1 of the Core Strategy and D8 of the SADMP supports the use of appropriate lighting in developments. Policy DM1 seeks to resist unacceptable impacts from lighting schemes on the surrounding environment, while Policy D8 seeks to foster a safer public realm via the provision of lighting. A Lighting Plan and specification report including lux plots has been provided in support of this full application to demonstrate that appropriate provision will be included in the design of the Block 3 site. The overall approach to lighting has been to create a sense of safety and activity in the public realm, while being respectful of the surrounding environment in terms of pollution. Up lighting of trees and hidden lighting within staircase handrails will add visual interest at night.
- 12.37 The surfacing materials and street furniture specifications largely follow those prescribed by the Council's Public Realm Design Guide.

- 12.38 The applicants have been asked to consider their policy response to the requirement for public art and they have proposed that the public art strategy for Block 3 will be agreed through the wider masterplanning process to ensure a coordinated site wide approach can be delivered, this will include provision within the Block 3 / Northern Boulevard area of the Firepool Site. They have agreed a condition be imposed to recognise this requirement. This may also have merit because the adjacent Innovation Centre being constructed by Somerset County Council via application SCC/3775/2020 also has a planning condition requiring the provision of public art to be agreed six months after first occupation, so there could be a collaborative approach.
- 12.39 This will be a disappointment for some in not seeing specific details now, however there is a real prospect of a better outcome reserving judgement until the wider boulevard plans and site wide Masterplan are advanced.
- 12.40 The application has undergone assessment through the lens of accessibility and equalities. This has required the space to be assessed from a number of users' viewpoints, including pedestrians, cyclists and those with mobility, hearing and visual impairments. Added to this is the proposed ramp to the north of the GWR Goods Office which provides a gradient friendly means of making up the 4m level difference between Canal Road and Trenchard Way within the Block 3 site area. One of the consequences of the piecemeal approach to the site so far is the fact that all users have had to be accommodated in the red-line area as drawn. When emergency, service, delivery and disabled parking vehicular movements are also added to the conversation then the ability to suit all needs becomes that much more difficult. Nevertheless, through the input from the RNIB, the Council's Equalities Group and Highways Authority the plans have been altered during the application process to come to an agreeable position that allows Block 3 to stand alone, whilst minimising the impact on the future development options on adjoining land.
- 12.41 The Case Officer also sought to involve the Taunton Disability Action Group in similar positive discussions, who were surprised an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) had not been completed. TDAG's input was to state the scheme must be inclusive and comply with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 until such time as the EIA could be reviewed and were happy to provide future input should the projects proceed.
- 12.42 This was discussed with the applicant. An EIA is not a validation requirement nor referenced in any planning policy, as such the applicant has not produced one to date. Its importance in the wider provision of public realm is fully understood and one is currently being produced although the applicants maintain this proposal is fully in accordance with all regulations, primarily Building Regulations.
- 12.43 One such challenge in meeting such regulations is the 4m level difference presenting a difficulty in providing gradient friendly transition and hence alongside the flights of steps proposed there is the 6m wide ramp. The steps

themselves are also of different gradients and widths to aid their use by different people. The ramp caters for cyclists, pedestrians who cannot or who choose not to use the steps, plus service and emergency vehicles which are an irregular occurrence. This facilitates access from Trenchard Way to Canal Road at a gradient no steeper than 1 in 22, and the ramp contains level sections, and there is also seating throughout the scheme at intervals for rest. All users are protected from unmanaged vehicular access by droppable bollards.

- 12.44 Previously it was proposed as use for access to disabled parking spaces and for delivery vehicles but spaces have been identified at the bottom of the ramp instead now, meaning this conflict is avoided.
- 12.45 In the initial submission a lift was also proposed but after design issues were raised the applicants reappraised its necessity and it was omitted. This matter was a key discussion point at the Council's Equalities Group. The inclusion of a lift is not a planning or building regulations requirement plus its installation cost and ongoing maintenance costs were not considered to represent value for money given the existence of the ramp as an alternative to the steps and therefore it remains omitted from the scheme.
- 12.46 Returning to the issue of cycle connectivity which is an objective of the boulevard through Firepool this has also been a matter of debate given the space and layout of the public realm between the proposed office and SCC Innovation Centre currently being constructed. Whilst trying to avoid 'Cyclist dismount' signage and taking into account the desire to segregate cyclists and to ensure the route is as direct as possible whilst allowing for gradients, the plans have been altered to show a dedicated route behind the office building and along the segregated ramp and therefore taking this potential conflict out of a potentially crowded area of public realm. Another cycle route is also provided via the tie in of Block 3 with the Trenchard Way vehicular access.
- 12.47 Another interesting area of public realm created by the levels change is a stepped informal seating area to the side of the retained GWR Goods Office. South facing, the area will allow people to dwell, eat lunch perhaps and enjoy views over the roofscape of Taunton.
- 12.48 The matter of ongoing maintenance and management of the public realm is one for the landowner, in this case the Council to consider. Landscaping will be protected for a period of time by condition.
- 12.49 Whilst concerns persist from the Council's Placemaking Officer it is considered the benefits significantly outweigh these subjective matters and provide the best fit given all the constraints and objectives.

Heritage and Archaeology

- 12.50 The NPPF is clear that the creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better

places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities (paragraph 126). With respect to the historic environment, the NPPF states that the heritage assets, such as Conservation Areas and listed buildings, should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance (paragraph 189). The comments from Historic England and the Council's Conservation Officer are noted with respect to the assessment the Local Planning Authority should undertake when assessing the impact of new development on heritage assets.

- 12.51 At this point it is important to differentiate between adjacent and local listed buildings, conservation areas and non-designated assets and the related but separate issue of the townscape impact in particular that on the setting of the listed Churches of St Mary's and St James'.
- 12.52 There are a number of designated heritage assets in the immediate vicinity surrounding the site including the Firepool Pumping Station, a cluster of buildings around Taunton Station, GURDS and the Former Shirt and Collar Factory Premises of Barnicotts Limited Printers, all of which are Grade II Listed. These heritage assets are not adversely impacted by the proposals by the presence of intervening development and a lack of direct intervisibility.
- 12.53 The nearest Conservation Area is the Staplegrove Conservation Area. The Conservation Area derives its special historic interest as the supposed original location of the medieval St. Thomas's Fair and land which held the nurseries of John Young, nineteenth century founder of the West Somerset Horticultural Society and instigator of Taunton's annual Flower Show. Many good examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth century terraced, semi-detached and detached middle-class housing survives in an externally well-maintained condition. Much of this occurs within the Elms Nursery Estate, a planned development whose largely intact layout and street planting makes it a very good example of its type. The Conservation Area is located a reasonable distance west with intervening development including Deane House, the tree lined streets and enclosure of buildings mean there are few, if any outwards views of the rest of the town. Only when you reach Staplegrove Road can you glimpse the Cricket Ground floodlights looking due east.
- 12.54 The application site also includes a Local Heritage Asset in the form of the GWR Goods Office, which is to be retained and is close to the Firepool Lock which is similarly of local importance, and both of which are not considered to be harmed by the proposal.
- 12.55 With reference to the town wide impact on heritage assets the decision-maker should bear in mind the statutory duty of section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings or their setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess and section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to determine planning applications in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

- 12.56 Historic England makes specific reference to the topography of Taunton and its influence in shaping the town and the consequent identity that is appreciated from long views from surrounding ridges. From those views the skyline is defined by the church towers of St James, St Mary Magdalene and St George's and the spire of St John's. Historic England state *'because of their intrinsic historic and architectural interest, as well as their group and communal value, those churches are highly designated buildings and Taunton's skyline is an important aspect of these churches' setting, contributing both to their significance and their visual and historical appreciation. Consequently, the ability to view these competing church towers and spire from longer ranged views, which have formed a characteristic of the settlement's skyline, is an important part also of their collective significance"*.
- 12.57 Historic England has been involved in a workshop relating to the wide Firepool Masterplan where the skyline/setting of churches issue was discussed. Work continues on the Masterplan including a Visual Impact Assessment. As well as a comprehensive site visit the Case Officer has also viewed the Firepool site from the respective towers of St Mary's and St James' to inform this report.
- 12.58 With respect to this specific application Historic England has asked that a Heritage Impact Assessment be undertaken to address concerns that the proposed four-storey office building will not significantly impact on the skyline and therefore the setting of the churches. Historic England has not stated that they perceive there to be an impact, let alone one that could be considered significantly, merely the process of assessing such impacts has not, to date, been robustly evidenced by the applicant. As such a study is currently being undertaken and will be referred to Historic England. What follows is the Case Officer's assessment of the impact and rationale as to why this application can be progressed pending the final comments of Historic England.
- 12.59 Block 3 sits on the northern edge of the Firepool site, as part of a wider masterplanned area located between the Canal/River and the railway line. The area has effectively been opened up to the public via the construction of the Northern Inner Distributor Road (NIDR) now the A3087 Trenchard Way which now affords some views across the town centre skyline. However, these views are merely glimpses from the new bridge north of Priory Avenue and where space has been left around the listed Pump House. Otherwise Trenchard Way to the east of the application site is enclosed by 3-7 storey development, including Lock House, the retirement living accommodation which is 3-4 storeys which Members will recall sits alongside the wider Firepool site and adjacent to where vehicular access to the wider site is to be achieved. This mass of development largely screens and competes with any opportunity to view the skyline from the north-eastern fringes of the town centre up to the Priorswood area.

- 12.60 Further to the west of the site views of the punctured skyline are obscured by commercial buildings with only the 6-storey 'Viridor' building at Priory Bridge Road and Cricket Ground floodlights providing points of reference. It is not until you reach the bridge over Station Road that the roofscape presents itself, at this point the proposed office building at Block 3 would barely register in your peripheral vision. Again, your eye is drawn to the Cricket Ground floodlights before registering and appreciating the towers and spires.
- 12.61 It is again not until you reach the site frontage of Block 3 that a view again avails itself. The west of the application site is where the 4-storey Innovation Centre is being constructed by Somerset County Council. As is true with the proposed office building, they present a gable or their shorter side to Trenchard Way in order to create the north-south boulevard. This intervention and creation of a clear gap actually lines up and frames the very view Historic England are concerned about. A new view in a new area of public realm to enjoy the uniqueness and quality of the skyline and its topographic setting. Whilst great attention is made to the churches, again one has to visually filter the Cricket Ground floodlights in the foreground. Clearly that development had to assess the very same policies and approach to conservation and was found to be acceptable.
- 12.62 Views from the north are then restricted somewhat by the change in topography alongside the alignment of Trenchard Way and the railway until you are much further north. East and west where again the Cricket Ground Floodlights form the first point of reference for interpreting the skyline. The office building proposed will also have no impact on immediate views from the north because of the screening effect caused by the new railway station multi-storey car park which lies on the north side of Trenchard Way. This building was built utilising permitted development rights and therefore no planning application was required. As such, no assessment of heritage impacts nor the skyline was possible. Views of the proposed office building from the south would be influenced by the multi-storey car parking forming a dominant backdrop being sited behind and being wider.
- 12.63 In addition, it is also worth acknowledging that neither the wider original Firepool Lock Masterplan, Lock House nor the Innovation Centre developments were assessed specifically for their impact on the skyline in the way Historic England is suggesting this application needs to be.
- 12.64 As has been evidenced throughout this report the Firepool area is subject to policies that support its development. It is worth noting that the Taunton Area Action Plan at Policy Fp1 states development is likely to require buildings averaging 4-5 storeys, with potential for taller structures (up to 8 storeys) in selected locations. At 4-storeys this application accords with that policy.

- 12.65 The choice of materials can be as important as establishing overall storey height. The red-brick and zinc roof will blend in with the general colour tone of the town-scape when viewed against other building of great height and light colour treatment.
- 12.66 Concern regarding high rise development in Taunton has in part been triggered and influenced by the Quantock House development at the junction of Mary Street and Paul Street. At 8-storeys, broad in elevation and clad in light coloured materials it is easily viewable from vantage points at Stoke Hill, Henlade and Cotlake Hill. Interestingly, the application for this building (38/18/0173 significantly revised design of 38/16/0345) did not involve consultation with Historic England and received support from Arts Taunton. The officer recognised the skyline and heritage impact but took the view the economic impacts were a significant material considering in recommending approval.
- 12.67 Simply put, Policy D1 of the SADMP 'Taunton's skyline' states 'Development which would detract from the distinctive character and attractiveness of Taunton's skyline will not be permitted'. Given the officer's assessment it is concluded the office building at Block 3 will not detract from the distinctive character at attractiveness of Taunton's skyline to the extent that the building will, in the view of the officer provide a benefit as a gateway to the boulevard which itself opens up the very skyline view that people will enjoy for years to come.
- 12.68 Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The benefits of the Firepool site are well known, the catalytic impact of Block 3 is important in realising the development of the remaining and most problematic area of the Firepool area left and being progressed by the Council in the absence of the market being sufficiently incentivised.
- 12.69 Whilst Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds this revolves around the skyline impact and setting of churches. After assessment by the Case Officer and the added weight of a Heritage Impact Assessment which will detail the argument made in this report it is considered the application meets the requirements of paragraphs 194 of the NPPF.
- 12.70 With respect to archaeology, a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) has been submitted. A suitable condition is imposed.
- 12.71 In light of the above, we consider that the proposals comply with the NPPF and Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Core Strategy as well as Policies ENV4, D1, D7 of the SADMP.

Transport, Highways and Active Travel

- 12.72 The site is an inherently sustainable site by reason of its location and opportunity to foster and promote sustainable and active travel for future residents, customers and visitors but also for those surrounding the site by way of the connecting linkages and sustainable/active travel initiatives.
- 12.73 The site is within a short walk of several bus stops, the mainline train station, a short scoot from the town centre where there are good connections to the National Cycle Route and those cycle routes associated with Trenchard Way and longer term those associated with the development of the wider Firepool site. The scheme includes significant cycle parking and detailed consideration has been given to pedestrian and cycle movements through the site and the public realm and linkages that will be delivered as already detailed in this report.
- 12.74 No car parking is provided within the scheme (with the exception of 2 disabled spaces) and staff/visitors could park in the retained Council car park whilst further development plans are considered on the wider Firepool site or use the GWR multi-storey.
- 12.75 The separate planning application for the new access junction off Trenchard Way will, in time, serve the wider Firepool site including Block 3, and at that time the Canal Road connection would be blocked up. If the Trenchard Way access was not constructed in time then Canal Rd would provide access for the initial construction and if still not completed when Block 3 is completed then at worst vehicular access for refuse collections, deliveries to the commercial areas, service and emergency vehicles, the two disabled parking spaces and pedestrians/cyclists for Block 3 plus any other current usage, for example the Council car park and access to the Canal lock, river and weir, until and unless any other application dictates otherwise.
- 12.76 If the Trenchard Way access, approved under reference 38/21/0464, was constructed and this application was also fully implemented then there is the potential for a through route from Trenchard Way to Priory Bridge Road via Canal Road. This wouldn't be acceptable and so anticipating that issue, Members may recall the imposition of Condition 9 on the access application that stated:
“Save for pedestrian and cycles, the access road hereby approved shall not be brought into use by vehicles until such time as a scheme setting out the areas within the wider Firepool site to be accessed by vehicles has been submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority. The said scheme shall prevent through traffic from Canal Road, Priory Bridge Rd and/or via the bridge from/to Youngman Place. The access road shall thereafter only be used in accordance with the approved scheme. The scheme may be varied over time through submissions to and approval in writing by the Local Planning Authority, but no new areas of the Firepool site shall be served by vehicles using the approved access road until and unless suitable mitigation is agreed with the Local Planning Authority and fully implemented”.

It is felt this provision safeguards that scenario, albeit unlikely.

- 12.77 The application has been thoroughly considered by the Highway Authority and several meetings have taken place to ensure matters such as the alterations to Canal Road and the provision of the cycle route are acceptable.
- 12.78 With the conditions suggested by the Highway Authority it is considered that the Block 3 development is in compliance with the NPPF and will not have a severe residual cumulative impact on the local highway network as defined within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as well as meeting the requirements of AAP policies Fp2, Tr4, Tr10, ED1 and ED5 as well as SADMP policies C6, A1, A2, A3 and D9.

Flood Risk and Drainage

- 12.79 Block 3 falls within Flood Zone 1 (the zone of lowest risk). Whilst the site-wide masterplan seeks to establish a comprehensive SuDS led strategy, Block 3 will initially drain to a temporary basin with onward outfall to the River Tone.
- 12.80 The sequential test by the Local Planning Authority (LPA) is required as per NPPF guidance. The site is allocated within the Local Plan and by Policy Fp1 of the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan, which is designated for a mixed-use scheme, and the sequential test is passed, and no further assessment will be required.
- 12.81 A Flood Risk Assessment has been submitted and confirmed as acceptable by the Environment Agency. The lack of comments from the LLFA is not seen as critical in this scenario.
- 12.82 In light of the above, it is considered that the development complies with the NPPF and Local Development Plan Policies CP1, CP8 (of the Core Strategy), and I4 (of the SADMP).

Ecology

- 12.83 An accompanying Ecological Statement describes the Block 3 land as of low ecological interest and opines there will be no impact on designated sites in the area. While acknowledging the low species diversity on site, it goes on to recommend some possible mitigation measures.
- 12.84 These are reaffirmed and enhanced by suggested conditions from the Somerset Ecology Service as consultee. These conditions in part protect bats, birds, small mammals and badgers from the works and two conditions seek to enhance the ecological value of the site via a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan and a Biodiversity Net Gain plan.
- 12.85 Away from the application site, a court Judgement (known as Dutch N), Natural England have advised the Local Planning Authority that in light of the unfavourable condition of the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site, before determining a planning application that may give rise to additional

phosphates within the catchment, competent authorities should undertake a project level Appropriate Assessment. However, the application proposals, in accordance with Natural England, do not contain any of the uses which would give rise to an increase in nutrient loadings at the wastewater treatment works and so a project level Appropriate Assessment is not required to be undertaken in this case (see Paragraph 7 above).

Noise

- 12.86 Policy DM1 outlines that potential noise pollution which could adversely impact amenity of residents or occupants of a site should be appropriately dealt with. A noise survey report has been prepared by Client: Somerset West and Taunton Council Report Title: Planning Statement Date: September 2021 Page: 37 Ion Acoustics to support this full planning application and concludes that although there is moderate noise pollution deriving from the nearby highways, sufficient sound insulation in the form of standard thermal double-glazed windows will mitigate the impact of this on the proposed office building. This has been reviewed by Environmental Health Colleagues who agree given the commercial uses proposed.

Ground Conditions

- 12.87 The submitted ground report confirms that there is limited contamination on the Site which is generally to be capped by hardstanding and buildings, with limited soft landscaping and no specific remediation measures required. The report concludes that a watching brief should be maintained during site works to ensure any unexpected contamination is dealt with correctly. The reports have been reviewed by Environmental Health colleagues whose comments are replicated in Section 8.2. A suitable condition has been imposed in the event unexpected contamination is discovered.

The impact on residential amenity

- 12.88 Works of the nature proposed here inevitably cannot be undertaken without some impact on residents. Policy DM1 outlines that potential noise pollution which could adversely impact amenity of residents or occupants of a site should be appropriately dealt with. Due to ground conditions piling will form part of the works which has potential to be disruptive. To mitigate as far as possible these impacts a Construction Management Plan will be secured via condition. It is also worth acknowledging that it is entirely possible that several projects within the domain of Firepool will be carried out at the same time. As such clear lines of communication with local residents is imperative.

13. Planning Balance and Conclusion

- 13.1. Delivering the redevelopment of the Firepool site is one of the Council's key corporate priorities and this planning application proposal is another vital step towards achieving that objective. The Firepool site has remained vacant for over a decade and there is strong support within the local community for it to be redeveloped. A new Masterplan and revised mix of uses for the wider

Firepool site is being prepared and the Council's objective is to deliver the site itself, starting with the commencement of work on the application site as soon as possible.

- 13.2. Whilst that Masterplan is being produced this planning application should be treated on its merits and on the balance of considerations, applying the relevant policies in the Development Plan, the weight that can be given to them, and all material considerations including national policy. It is concluded that the proposal accords with the Development Plan, read as a whole. Specific matters which Members will need to take a view on in their balanced decision making is the applicant's piecemeal approach to developing Firepool, the approach to Public Art, the lack of an Equalities Impact Assessment, the approach to general accessibility within the arbitrary red-line area of the application, withdrawing PD rights and the lack of any management of maintenance plans. The recorded concerns and objections have been replicated, explained, and assessed in this report, balanced against a series of material considerations.
- 13.3. Significant weight has been given to the catalytic effects of this proposal to finally realise the economic benefits of the wider proposals, the value of re-using brownfield land, the intended high quality of the overall regeneration project and that the application will facilitate the actual delivery of development on a brownfield site that has remained vacant for over a decade.
- 13.4. It is considered that the tangible benefits of the scheme outweigh any minor residual concerns. For the reasons set out above, having regard to all the matters raised, it is therefore recommended that planning permission is granted subject to the stated conditions set out in full in Appendix 1.
- 13.5. In preparing this report the Case Officer has considered fully the implications and requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010.

Appendix 1 – Planning conditions and informatives

1. The development hereby permitted shall be begun within three years of the date of this permission.
Reason: In accordance with the provisions of Section 91 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by Section 51(1) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004).
2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the approved plans and documents as stated on the 'Planning Document List, Firepool-Block 3', dated 23/02/2022.
Reason: For the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of proper planning.
3. The ground floor of the new building hereby approved shall be used as a shop other than for the sale of hot food (Class E(a)), and food and drink which is mostly consumed on the premises (Class E(b)) and the first, second and third floors shall be used for offices (Class E(g)(i)) and for no other purpose (including any other purpose in Class E of the Schedule to the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, or in any provision equivalent to that Class in any statutory instrument revoking and re-enacting that Order with or without modification). Reason: To clarify the use and to prevent changes to sub-optimal uses that undermine the viability and vitality of the intended development.
4. The GWR Goods Office Building (and as extended) shall be used for food and drink which is mostly consumed on the premises (Class E(b)) and for no other purpose (including any other purpose in Class E of the Schedule to the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, or in any provision equivalent to that Class in any statutory instrument revoking and re-enacting that Order with or without modification). Reason: To clarify the use and to prevent changes to sub-optimal uses that undermine the viability and vitality of the intended development.
5. Notwithstanding the approved plans full details of all external finishing materials, for buildings, public realm and highway shall be submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to their use in the development hereby approved. Details shall include manufacturers details with the provision of samples to be ascertained with the Local Planning Authority prior to submission of the detailed specification. Once agreed, any subsequent variation to the approved details shall only be achieved via agreement in writing with the Local Planning Authority. Reason: In the interests of visual amenity and to reflect flexibility in the current/future availability of materials.
6. Save for the works shown on drawing number 21137-TA2-131-T2 (Highway General Arrangement Canal Road East), no construction works shall be commenced until a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan (BEP) has been submitted to, and been approved in writing by, the Local Planning Authority. Photographs of the installed features will also be submitted to the Local Planning Authority prior to first occupation of any part of the development. The content of the BEP shall include the following:
 - a) Provision for 2x integrated bird boxes to be installed on each building and maintained thereafter.
 - b) Provisions for invertebrate refuge in the form of a minimum 2x insect towers incorporated into the landscaping/planting scheme shown on the approved plans and maintained thereafter.

- c) The grassland areas of the application site will be sown with a native species wildflower seed mix such as Emorsgate Flowering lawn mixture (EL1) or similar and managed appropriately.
- d) All new shrubs must be high nectar producing to encourage a range of invertebrates to the site, to provide continued foraging for bats. The shrubs must also appeal to night-flying moths which are a key food source for bats. The Royal Horticultural Society guide, "RHS Perfect for Pollinators, www.rhs.org.uk/perfectforpollinators" provides a list of suitable plants both native and non-native.

Reason: In accordance with Government policy for the enhancement of biodiversity within development as set out in paragraph 174(d) of the National Planning Policy Framework.

- 7. The programme of archaeological work shall be implemented in accordance with the submitted and approved Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI, Cotswold Archaeology October 2021) for each phase which has been submitted to the Local Planning Authority. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the approved WSI. Reason: The site has been identified as of possible archaeological interest and therefore as requiring further archaeological investigation in accordance with section 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework and Policy CP8 of the adopted Taunton Deane Core Strategy.
- 8. No development shall commence on any phase (including demolition, ground works, vegetation clearance) until a Construction Environmental Management Plan has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority for that identified phase or works. In discharging this condition the following information shall be supplied:
 - a) A 24-hour emergency contact number;
 - b) Locations for the storage of all plant, machinery and materials;
 - c) Details of fuel oil and chemical storage, bunding, delivery and use, including how both minor and major spillages will be dealt with.
 - d) Construction vehicle routes to and from site including any off-site routes for the disposal of excavated material;
 - e) The proposed hours of operation of construction activities;
 - f) Construction delivery hours;
 - g) Expected number of construction vehicles per day;
 - h) Car parking for contractors;
 - i) A scheme to encourage the use of Public Transport amongst contractors;
 - j) Measures to avoid traffic congestion impacting upon the Strategic Road network;
 - k) Measures to protect vulnerable road users (cyclists and pedestrians);
 - l) Any necessary temporary traffic management measures;
 - m) Arrangements to receive abnormal loads or unusually large vehicles;
 - n) Site security, inclusive of details of all bunds, fences and other physical protective measures to be placed on the site including the time periods for placing and retaining such measures;
 - o) The control and removal of spoil and wastes;
 - p) Containment of silt/soil contaminated run-off;
 - q) Disposal of contaminated drainage, including water pumped from excavations;

- r) Measures to prevent the pollution of surface and ground water arising from the storage of plant and materials and other construction activities;
- s) The frequency, duration and means of operation involving demolitions, excavations, drilling, piling, and any concrete production;
- t) Sound attenuation measures incorporated to reduce noise at source (to include specific reference to piling activities);
- u) Details of measures to be taken to reduce the generation of dust;
- v) Site induction for workforce highlighting pollution prevention and awareness;
- w) Specific measures to be adopted to mitigate construction impacts in pursuance of the Environmental Code of Construction Practice; and
- x) Methods of communicating the Construction Management Plan to staff, visitors and neighbouring residents and businesses.

The agreed Construction Environmental Management Plan shall thereafter be implemented in full unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Reason: In the interests of highway safety, to protect the amenities of nearby properties during the construction of the development and to protect the natural and water environment from pollution.

9. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the submitted Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) by Jubb Consulting Engineers dated December 2021 ref: 21137-FRA-02v1 and the mitigation measures it details, particularly:
 - a) The final drainage for the site should be fully integrated within the overall Firepool development.
 - b) Block 3 Finished Floor levels must be no lower than 20.14m AOD. These mitigation measures shall be fully implemented prior to occupation of [any part of the development/Block 3] and subsequently in accordance with the FRA's timing/ phasing arrangements. The measures detailed above shall be retained and maintained thereafter throughout the lifetime of the development.

Reason: To prevent the increased risk of flooding.

10. If, during development, contamination not previously identified is found to be present at the site then no further development (unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority) shall be carried out until a remediation strategy detailing how this contamination will be dealt with has been submitted to, and approved in writing by, the Local Planning Authority. The remediation strategy shall be implemented as approved. Reason: To prevent increased risk of pollution to the water environment.
11. Prior to its installation the specification of any ground-based, wall-mounted or rooftop plant, machinery and equipment shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Such a specification shall also include provisions for screening, colour treatments or other ways of reducing its visual impact. Reason: In the interests of visual amenity.
12. A Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) shall be submitted to, and be approved in writing by, the Local Planning Authority prior to first occupation of the development. The content of the LEMP shall include the following:
 - a) Description and evaluation of features to be managed.
 - b) Ecological trends and constraints on site that might influence management.
 - c) Aims and objectives of management.

- d) Appropriate management options for achieving aims and objectives.
- e) Prescriptions for management actions.
- f) Preparation of a work schedule (including an annual work plan capable of being rolled forward over a five-year period).
- g) Details of the body or organization responsible for implementation of the plan.
- h) On-going monitoring and remedial measures.

The LEMP shall also include details of the legal and funding mechanism(s) by which the long-term implementation of the plan will be secured by the developer with the management body(ies) responsible for its delivery. The LEMP shall also set out (where the results from monitoring show that conservation aims and objectives of the LEMP are not being met) how contingencies and/or remedial action will be identified, agreed and implemented so that the development still delivers the fully functioning biodiversity objectives of the originally approved scheme. The approved LEMP will be implemented in accordance with the approved details.

Reason: In the interests of the 'Favourable Conservation Status' of populations of European and UK protected species, UK priority species and habitats listed on s41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

13. No removal of hedgerows, trees or shrubs or works to or demolition of buildings or structures shall take place between 1st March and 31st August inclusive, unless a competent ecologist has undertaken a careful, detailed check for active birds' nests immediately before the vegetation is cleared or works to or demolition of building structures commences and provides written confirmation that no birds will be harmed and/or that there are appropriate measures in place to protect nesting bird interest on site. Any such written confirmation should be submitted to the Local Planning Authority by the ecologist accompanied by dated photos showing the site before and after clearance. In no circumstances should netting be used to exclude nesting birds. Reason: In the interests of nesting wild birds.
14. Notwithstanding the approved plans and prior to the installation of any external lighting, a "lighting design for bats", following Guidance Note 8 - Bats and Artificial Lighting (ILP and BCT 2018), shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The design shall show how and where external lighting will be installed (including through the provision of technical specifications) so that it can be clearly demonstrated that areas to be lit will not disturb or prevent bats using their territory. The design should accord with Step 5 of the said Guidance Note, including submission of contour plans illustrating Lux levels. All external lighting shall be installed in accordance with the specifications and locations set out in the design, and these shall be maintained thereafter in accordance with the approved design. Under no circumstances should any other external lighting be installed without prior consent from the Local Planning Authority. Reason: In the interests of the 'Favourable Conservation Status' of populations of European protected species.
15. The landscaping/planting scheme shown on the approved plans shall have been completely carried out by the end of the first available planting season after the first occupation within Block 3, unless any variation is agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority relating to phasing. When undertaken

the planting scheme shall also include sensory planting. For a period of ten years after the completion of the development, the trees and shrubs shall be protected and maintained and any trees or shrubs that cease to grow, shall be replaced by trees or shrubs of similar size and species or other appropriate trees or shrubs as may be approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Reason: To meet the objectives of the Garden Town status of Taunton and ensure that the proposed development benefits from the approved landscaping scheme in the interests of visual amenity, ecological enhancement and landscape character.

16. Prior to first occupation of any part of the development a strategy for Public Art shall have been submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority. The strategy shall set out how Public Art is being considered in this application area or as part of the wider Firepool site (within the application blue line) and timescales for provision. Reason: To ensure Public Art is integrated into the Public Realm.
17. No part of the development hereby permitted shall be brought into use until the highway access scheme, as shown in principle in Drawing 131 T3, has been provided in accordance with a design and specification to be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority and to be fully implemented in accordance with the approved details, unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. Reason: To ensure the development is afforded safe and convenient access.
18. No part of the development hereby permitted shall be brought into use until the cycle route, as shown in principle in Drawing FB3-AHR-S1-XX-DR-L-08109 P07, has been carried out in accordance with a design and specification to be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority and to be fully implemented in accordance with the approved details, unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. Reason: To promote cycling in the interests of sustainable development.
19. Before the development is occupied or utilised the cycle parking facilities shown on the submitted plans must have been constructed. Thereafter, these must be maintained, kept free from obstruction and available for the purposes specified. Reason: To promote cycling in the interests of sustainable development.
20. No building or use hereby permitted shall be occupied or use commenced until the disabled parking, and facilities for loading, unloading, circulation and manoeuvring have been completed in accordance with the approved plans. Thereafter, these areas shall be kept free of obstruction and available for these uses. Reason: To ensure the development is afforded suitable provision.
21. Provision shall be made within the site for the disposal of surface water so as to prevent its discharge onto the highway, details of which shall have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Such provision shall be installed prior to development above damp-proof course level and thereafter maintained at all times. Reason: To ensure the highway is not inundated with surface water for the safety and convenient of all road users.

22. No occupation of the development shall commence until a Travel Plan has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development shall thereafter be operated in accordance with the approved Travel Plan. Those parts of the Approved Travel Plan that are identified therein as capable of implementation after occupation shall be implemented in accordance with the timetable contained therein and shall continue to be implemented as long as any part of the development is occupied. Reason: To promote sustainable modes of transport.

Notes

1. In accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework the Council and relevant statutory consultees have worked in a constructive and creative way with the applicant to find solutions to problems in order to reach a positive recommendation and to enable the grant of planning permission.
2. Development, insofar as it affects the rights of way should not be started, and the rights of way should be kept open for public use until the necessary Order (temporary closure/stopping up/diversion) or other authorisation has come into effect/ been granted. Failure to comply with this request may result in the developer being prosecuted a footpath is built on or otherwise interfered with.
3. The developers are reminded of the legal protection afforded to badgers and their resting places under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 (as amended). It is advised that during construction, excavations or large pipes (>200mm diameter) must be covered at night. Any open excavations will need a means of escape, for example a plank or sloped end, to allow any animals to escape. In the event that badgers, or signs of badgers are unexpectedly encountered during implementation of this permission it is recommended that works stop until advice is sought from a suitably qualified and experienced ecologist at the earliest possible opportunity.
4. The developers and their contractors are reminded of the legal protection afforded to bats and bat roosts under legislation including the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. In the unlikely event that bats are encountered during implementation of this permission it is recommended that works stop and advice is sought from a suitably qualified, licensed and experienced ecologist at the earliest possible opportunity.
5. The applicant is advised to contact Network Rail Asset Protection Team via assetprotectionwestern@networkrail.co.uk at least 3 months before works commence to determine the interface with Network Rail assets, buried or otherwise and by entering into a Basis Asset Protection Agreement, if required.
6. With regard to Condition 11, the Local Planning Authority reserves the right to confirm such plant and equipment installations require full planning permission. Such installations include those for renewable energy purposes, air handing for heating/cooling, odour control, IT and security.
7. The applicant is advised of the comments received 16 November 2021 from the Crime Prevention Design Advisor at Avon and Somerset Police.
8. *With regard to Conditions 18 and 19 the provision of these works will require a legal agreement and contact should be made with the Highway Authority well in advance of commencing the works so that the agreement is complete prior to starting the highway works.*

9. The development hereby approved includes the carrying out of work on the adopted highway. You are advised that before undertaking work on the adopted highway you must enter into a highway agreement under Section 278 of the Highways Act 1980 with the Council, which would specify the works and the terms and conditions under which they are to be carried out. Planning permission is not permission to work in the highway. A Highway Agreement under Section 278 of the Highways Act 1980 must be completed, the bond secured and the Highway Authority's technical approval and inspection fees paid before any drawings will be considered and approved.
10. With regard to Condition 21 any systems provided for the purposes of draining the site shall be constructed and maintained privately until such time as the drainage is adopted. At no point will this Authority accept private infrastructure being connected into highway drainage systems. Consent from the riparian owner of any land drainage facilities affected, that are not within the developer's title, will be required for adoption.
11. The applicant is advised of these comments from the Environment Agency-
 - a) Measures should be taken to prevent the runoff of any contaminated drainage during the construction phase. Any oil or chemical storage facilities should be sited in bunded areas. The capacity of the bund should be at least 10% greater than the capacity of the storage tank or, if more than one tank is involved, the capacity of the largest tank within the bunded area. Hydraulically inter-linked tanks should be regarded as a single tank. There should be no working connections outside the bunded area. There shall be no discharge of foul or contaminated drainage from the site into either groundwater or any surface waters, whether direct to watercourses, ponds or lakes, or via soakaways/ditches. Generic advice on managing contamination is available on the Land Contamination: Risk Management pages of the GOV.UK website:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/land-contamination-risk-management-lcrm>
 - b) Any waste generated must be disposed of in accordance with Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2011. If waste material is brought onto site for construction purposes, the developer should ensure that appropriate permits are held according to [Waste \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2011](#)

Appendix 2 – Quality Review Panel Report - September 2021

The emerging Masterplan and detailed plans for Block 3 were presented to and assessed by QRP in September 2021. The QRP report, whilst marked 'Confidential' is now appropriate to place in the public domain given this application has now been submitted and the Masterplan has undergone further consultation.



Somerset West and Taunton Quality Review Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Firepool

Thursday 30 September 2021

Via Zoom

Panel

Andrew Beharrell (Chair)

Marie Burns

Barny Evans

Richard Lewis

Sowmya Parthasarathy

Attendees

Alison Blom-Cooper	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Simon Fox	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Graeme Thompson	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Fiona Webb	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Paul Bryan	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Karen Wray	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Ann Rhodes	Somerset West and Taunton Council

Sarah Povall	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Jeremy Guise	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Dan Friel	Somerset County Council
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects
Miranda Kimball	Frame Projects
Abigail Joseph	Frame Projects

Apologies / report copied to

Rebecca Miller Somerset West and Taunton Council

Confidentiality

This is a pre-application review, and therefore confidential. As a public organisation

Somerset West and Taunton Council is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and, in the case of an FOI request, may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

Report of Formal Review Meeting

30 September 2021

SWTQRP01_Firepool

1. Project name and site address

Firepool, Canal Road, Taunton, TA1 1QS

2. Presenting team

Tim Bacon	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Rachel Papworth	Somerset West and Taunton Council

Jim Price	Somerset West and Taunton Council
Martin Jones	Building Design Partnership
Ed Arthur	Building Design Partnership
Adam Spall	AHR Architects
Luke Smith	AHR Architects
David Gwilliam	Jubb
Elliott Kelly	Avison Young
Pete Stockall	Avison Young

3. Planning authority briefing

Firepool is a major regeneration area within Taunton town centre, and the adopted Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP, adopted 2008) allocates the site for development. Circumstances have changed since the site was allocated in the TCAAP, and as such, the policy context for the site, primarily the development mix proposed by policy, is out of date. As such, a Firepool masterplan and design guidance are now being prepared to guide the site's development.

Since the office-led allocation in the TCAAP was adopted, and since the retail-led mixed-use scheme was approved, circumstances have changed including:

- markets for both town centre office and retail have changed quite significantly;
- the COVID pandemic hit in early 2020, followed by an accompanying recession and plans for economic recovery to 'build back better';
- the establishment of Somerset West and Taunton Council (April 2019);
- the council declares a Climate Emergency (February 2019) and Ecological Emergency (November 2020) – setting out how it commits to working towards carbon neutrality by 2030 in the adopted Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy (October 2020) and SWT Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience (CNCR) Action Plan (October 2020);
- the council sets out its vision for Taunton Garden Town (July 2019) and adopted a Garden Town Charter and Checklist (December 2019); and;
- in final consultations on the draft Districtwide Design Guide and draft Taunton Garden Town Public Realm Design Guide SPDs with a view to adopt shortly.

Proposals for the Firepool site now call for a mixed-use scheme of up to 600 homes, with a leisure and entertainment hub, along the northern and southern edges of the River Tone. The site features a north-south oriented boulevard, which links Taunton rail station to the north, and the town centre and primary retail area to the south.

The project consists of a masterplan covering the entire site and the development of more detailed proposals for Block 3 (north), which will be submitted as a stand-alone detailed planning application. This includes an office building, restaurant and the first phase of the public realm and Boulevard to the north of Canal Road. A multi-storey car park proposal was removed from a previous iteration of the Block 3 scheme after concerns were raised by the LPA, Highway Authority and Design Review Panel, but currently remains part of the 'developer draft' masterplan.

The Firepool site is owned and is being developed by Somerset West and Taunton Council. The council is also the Local Planning Authority (LPA). It will be for the LPA to determine the correct balance between application of policy and consideration of material considerations in the determination of any relevant planning applications. As a result, the council, as developer and applicant, is producing a Firepool Masterplan and accompanying Design Guidance, and the council as LPA is working with the applicant to ensure that it can support the proposals.

Officers seek the panel's views in particular on the following issues:

- demonstration of exemplar environmental and design standards as set by the council;
- approach to transportation and if the masterplan suitably maximises the location's opportunities and demonstrates the promotion and use of non-car modes, including the potential for a car free development;
- design principles and the safeguarding of local character to protect and enhance the Taunton skyline as well as surrounding heritage assets;
- the masterplan's response to the Garden Town Vision, and if proposals will deliver development which clearly embodies the principles of a 21st century Garden Town;

- the green infrastructure and if it holistically considers the opportunities and constraints.

4. Quality Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel feels this scheme has immense potential to become an exemplar for modern local living and offers an exciting opportunity to help shape twenty-first century Taunton. The site benefits from a riverfront location, in close proximity to both the railway station and town centre, and can help to deliver Taunton's Garden Town vision. However, the masterplan has not yet fully embraced the vision or the potential of the site. The panel wants to see a scheme emerge that maximises the riverfront location and its distinctive landscape character. It feels that if the scheme puts the emphasis on sustainable green infrastructure and landscaping, a truly special place for Taunton can be delivered. Notwithstanding the strong gesture of the boulevard, the masterplan requires a clear and comprehensive network of connections with the town centre and wider surroundings. The landscape is dominated by hardstanding design, and the sense of place feels unresolved. The landscape solution should take inspiration from its surroundings and further refinement is needed to delineate what is public, semi-private and private outdoor space. In line with the Garden Town Vision, the panel encourages the scheme to futureproof any parking solution and make a concerted effort to help improve connectivity in Taunton beyond the site's boundary. Considering the local authority's aims for carbon neutrality, the panel wants to see sustainable design principles, addressing embedded and operational carbon, locked into the design. These comments are expanded below.

Placemaking and identity

- By responding to the special qualities of the Firepool site, the panel feels the applicant can start to identify, prioritise and communicate what are the key components of the masterplan, which will help to give the development its identity.
- The panel would like to see the masterplan start with spaces and the public realm and explore how the buildings enclose them. By starting with people's experience of the place, rather than with generic building types, special character areas can emerge to help create this unique new neighbourhood.

- The panel admires the ambition of the council's vision for Taunton and Firepool, and suggests a need to focus on doing a few key things really well and ensuring the main objectives are adequately funded.
- The panel welcomes the efforts to support local residents' shifting work patterns, with the workspace and innovation centre, and encourages this thinking and approach to go further across the masterplan to support the community to live, work and play locally.
- The panel is encouraged by the thought that has gone into the detail design for Block 3. The Block's identity and purpose are clear and expects that as the scheme progresses, the applicant will apply an equivalent level of thoughtful contextual design to the remaining blocks.

Landscape

- To maximise the potential of the site, the panel feels the landscaping strategy needs reconsideration.
- With the surrounding greenery and River Tone, the panel encourages the applicant to soften the landscape with more greenery as hardstanding landscaping dominates the current design.
- In particular, the panel is unsure if the amphitheatre and market square, which rely on hard landscaping, are the right interventions for the scheme. It would be helpful to understand how they fit into the wider Taunton context.
- The panel also questions the character and scale of the major public realm interventions. The boulevard and plaza are significant city-scale spaces and it would like these spaces and their identities to be reviewed.
- As part of this process, the panel encourages the applicant to think carefully about the words used to describe the development. Boulevard and plaza sound like large scale urban spaces, which may not be sympathetic to the special character of Firepool and the wider context of Taunton..
- The panel encourages the applicant to introduce more diverse open spaces, including public, private, and semi-private spaces, to help breakdown the blocks and to ensure the landscape is woven through the scheme.

- The panel also requests greater clarity about changes in level and the site's topography, to demonstrate accessibility and inclusive design.

Connectivity

- The panel recognises the opportunity for the site to become a key connector, linking the train station and town centre. However, the current designs need to go further to demonstrate these connections beyond the site's boundary and how Firepool links into the wider city.
- Given the scale and location, the panel anticipates this site will be busy and suggests that cyclists and pedestrians are separated on selected key routes to ensure everyone can move through it with ease and enjoyment. While the panel welcomes the approach to the riverfront as an active connector, the current design's lack of surveillance and safety strategy are of concern. The panel recommends either clear daytime and night time routes through and out the site, or a design approach that animates and activates the riverfront 24 hours a day.

Parking

- Given the proximity to the train station, the town centre, and the high proportion of flats proposed, the panel questions the need for a 0.4 car parking ratio.
- However, if this level of parking is required to meet current local needs, it suggests that a temporary multi-story facility, could offer a future proof solution. If parking requirements reduce in future, the car park could be converted or redeveloped.
- A centralised parking solution would also be less convenient for residents, supporting behaviour change by discouraging habitual car use.
- The design should avoid surface parking courts unless there is a clear and demonstrable strategy to convert these into open space or homes once the predicted reduction in car ownership is realised.
- The planning authority should also take a lead in aligning the Firepool development with the town's wider parking and transport strategy, minimising car dependency, and maximising sustainable modes of transport.

- The applicant should support this process by improving the site's connections to Taunton, for example by contributing to an improved cycling route to the secondary school north of the site.
- As part of the wider transportation and connectivity strategy, the panel hopes to see further consideration for car clubs and bike hire for the scheme.

Sustainability

- The scheme's sustainability strategy needs to demonstrate further detail as design progresses. There is a risk these aspirations will get value engineered out if the targets are not embedded into the design.
- The panel welcomes the scheme's all electric approach to energy. However, it feels further work is needed to demonstrate the scheme's embodied carbon and construction strategy, the approach to material selection and durability, and the wider circular economy strategy.
- In terms of materials and building performance, the panel cautions the potential risk of overheating from highly glazed south facing facades. The south facing river frontage is a key asset of the site – but the detail of the architectural design will need to balance maximising river views with thermal performance.

Next steps

- The panel would welcome the opportunity to review the masterplan again, as detail design progresses.
- The scale and significance of the development mean that it could benefit from a series of Quality Review Panel sessions on specific topics such as: the masterplan's riverfront and public realm strategy; sustainability; housing typologies; and more detailed designs for individual plots.
- The panel recommends that the applicant and planning team visit other comparable places together to establish a common understanding of what works and what does not. The panel would be happy to suggest potential destinations for a study tour.