

# 3 Context for the Taunton Waterways strategy

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance is part of planning policy and guidance documents that are used to achieve the council's visions and ambitions for creating greener and better places. This section identifies the key documents that establish the context for the Strategy and will be most relevant to its delivery.

## 3.1 Planning Context

### **Taunton Deane Borough Council Core Strategy (adopted in 2011)**

The Core Strategy states that "...the growth strategy for Taunton is to regenerate the town centre, providing a stronger and more vibrant core with a dynamic and diversified economy, a choice of residential accommodation, retail, leisure, community, sporting and cultural facilities." Numerous brownfield opportunity sites have been identified and allocated by the Council for redevelopment. The Core Strategy

Vision for Taunton identifies the River Tone as playing a significant role in that regeneration, becoming "...an attractive corridor through the heart of the town, linking the redevelopment sites."

Additionally, "green wedges between the different areas of the town will be retained and enhanced, helping to provide a network of green infrastructure linking the heart of the town with the surrounding countryside" and the tributaries connecting into the river and canal network offer important opportunities for enhancement within those wedges.

The Core Strategy also recognises the importance of biodiversity through Strategic Objective 8 (Environment) which aims: "...to maintain and enhance biodiversity, the natural and man-made environment..." and policies CP1 (Climate Change) and CP8 (Natural Environment) set out requirements to achieve no net loss in biodiversity and to conserve and enhance the natural and historic environment. The Waterways are a key strategic asset that can help the town to achieve these policies.

A new Local Plan for Somerset is in the process of being prepared, but is at too early a stage to inform this work.

### **Taunton Deane Site Allocations and Development Management Plan 2028**

Whilst the Core Strategy establishes the long-term requirements for growth and its broad distribution, with the exception of a number of strategic site allocations and high level policies, it does not set out smaller allocations. The Site Allocations and Development Management Plan fits within the framework of the Core Strategy and sets out both detailed site allocations up to 2028 and specific development management policies with which development must comply.

## Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan 2008

The adopted Area Action Plan for the Town Centre provides the policy framework to guide the redevelopment of several key waterside sites, including Coal Orchard which has been built out, and the Firepool site which is underway. The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance commission is an important opportunity to provide further design principles to ensure that opportunities to re-connect the town with the River Tone are maximised when these sites are redeveloped.

## Taunton Garden Town

Taunton was designated as a Garden Town in 2017 by the Government. The Garden Town Vision proposed a comprehensive approach to improve the quality of development, strengthen the connections between town and country through a network of green spaces, with specific reference to the role of the Waterways.

The Vision and Vision Themes are referenced in section 2.1 above.

The importance of the ‘blue infrastructure’ is highlighted on page 26 of the Taunton Garden Town 2040 – Town Centre Prospectus:

“A key objective of the Garden Town vision is to re-establish connections between Taunton and the surrounding landscape by making the most of its rivers, canal, streams and watercourses. Taunton owes its location to the River Tone and its tributaries. Together with the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal, the River Tone connects the town to the surrounding countryside. However, at present much of the town turns its back on the river.

The River Tone provides opportunities for enhancing and creating multifunctional green infrastructure corridors, balancing access and ecological enhancements and linking regeneration sites.

The existing green connections into the town from Longrun Meadow, Firepool

Lock and Vivary Park need to be joined up, through the creation of pleasant and attractive pedestrian and cycle routes along the River Tone and through the town centre.

The design of new neighbourhoods will consider how water can be managed intelligently to manage storm water, facilitate irrigation, and promote habitats resilient to flooding and climate change, aligned with the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme.”

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance document is designed to develop a clearer understanding of what those opportunities might be and how they may be delivered.

Since designation, the Council has published the:

- Taunton Design Charter and Checklist (October 2019)
- Taunton Garden Town 2040: Town Centre Prospectus (January 2021)

- Adopted Taunton Garden Town Public Realm Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (December 2021)
- Adopted District-wide Design Guide SPD (December 2021)
- Adopted masterplan for the Firepool site (adopted March 2023)

The Taunton Waterways Strategy and associated guidance are compatible with these documents and consistent with the development and design ambition and guidance that they contain. The Strategy and Guidance provide further layers of information and direction to structure and guide the delivery of successful and sustained regeneration. This document is intended to be both a tool that informs and advises all bodies investing in the Waterways corridor, and a material consideration for the Council and stakeholders in planning decision-making.

## 3.2 Climate change, Flood Alleviation and Ecological Emergencies

The Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation and Improvements Scheme (TSFAIS)

Somerset West & Taunton Council (now part of Somerset Council) and the Environment Agency have partnered over a number of years to identify strategic flood risk solutions for Taunton that can both reduce the current flood risk and appropriately mitigate against the future impacts of climate change. The Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation and Improvements Scheme (TSFAIS) identified multiple schemes which collectively would deliver strategic flood solutions for the town.

The TSFAIS Framework sets out 12 projects to be delivered over the next 30 years which, in combination, would manage the predicted impact on river flooding from climate change up to 2118.

The Council is currently progressing with three short-term measures, of particular relevance to the Waterways Strategy:

- TTC5 - Left Bank of Tone Defences;
- TTC10 - Firepool Lock and associated bund between River and Canal; and
- LRM - Longrun Meadow Attenuation Improvements.

Other projects in the TSFAIS have indicative timescales, but no funding is yet secured and timescales agreed. These are referenced in the Management and Maintenance Plan.

## The Carbon Neutrality & Climate Resilience Action Plan

The Council declared a climate emergency in February 2019 and adopted the Somerset Climate Change Emergency Strategy, and approved its Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Action Plan (CNCR) in October 2020.

The CNCR sets out how the Council will work towards carbon neutrality by 2030 through a series of key focuses and actions and it has a significant emphasis on green and blue infrastructure. This entails a commitment to bolstering natural assets such as parks, water bodies and ecosystems to mitigate climate change impacts and enhance resilience. The plan outlines strategic measures to invest in and expand green and blue infrastructure, recognising their crucial role in fostering carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and overall climate resilience within the community. Priorities include landscaping (such as tree planting and improved vegetation cover) to enhance drainage and mitigate flood risk, and delivering biodiversity net gain and providing active travel corridors. The recently formed Local Nature Partnership is identified as a key forum for co-ordinating and delivering actions in line with the Network Recovery Strategy.

## **Climate Positive Planning Guidance + Net Zero Carbon Toolkit 2022**

The Council also approved and published Climate Positive Planning Guidance in February 2021, which was updated in October 2023. This provides guidance and signposting to support and underscore adopted planning policies, national guidance and legislation in the interim period pending the adoption of future Local Plan(s). It specifically addresses the relevance and justification of Core Strategy Policy DM5, focusing on the use of resources and sustainable design, aligning development plans with climate-conscious principles to ensure a resilient and sustainable built environment.

The approach to delivering sustainable development, as set out in the Climate Positive Planning Guidance and associated Toolkit includes a robust appraisal of several key criteria relating, primarily, to the natural and built environments. This is demonstrated through the requirement

for a thorough environmental impact assessment, integration of green and blue infrastructure and a focus on renewable energy sources to reduce the carbon footprint. It directs redevelopment to prioritise energy efficiency, flood mitigation and resilience measures, incorporating adaptive strategies for future climate changes. Community engagement, education and partnership working are also emphasised.

Investment in the Waterways Corridor is a key means of supporting the Council's ambition to address the climate emergency. It has the potential to deliver multiple ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration; reducing the urban heat island effect and improving air quality; providing natural flood management to improve the quality of water and reduce the risk of flooding; providing attractive corridors for active travel and wildlife; bringing physical and mental health benefits and re-connecting people with nature.

## Ecological Emergency Action Plan

The Council declared an Ecological Emergency in October 2020 and approved an Ecological Emergency Action Plan which seeks to address ecological issues alongside the climate emergency actions. Its objectives are to: embed nature recovery throughout the Council's work; work with partners to deliver ecological recovery and protection; enable citizens to connect and take action for nature; and to measure and communicate progress over time.

There is only passing reference to blue infrastructure within the Action Plan but the targets are relevant to any investment in the Waterways, be that for management and maintenance, large scale redevelopment of previously developed land or more modest interventions. The Waterways within the town and the wider catchment offer strategic opportunities to deliver positively and significantly against

multiple ecological targets if a coordinated approach is adopted across the Waterways as a whole.

## Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Somerset Local Nature Partnership is in the early stage of developing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. At this stage, a number of Priority Outcomes are emerging but remain subject to further discussion and refinement. Those related to water include:

- dynamic, clean, naturally flowing (where possible) watercourses, better connected with wetlands and floodplains, and habitats on banks and margins
- rivers and streams with increased abundance and biodiversity of native plant and animal species, including keystone species

- improvement in flows and water quality will have been factors leading to almost all of the rivers in Somerset consistently being assessed in 'good ecological status' and
- riparian habitats are more extensive, healthy and diverse

Whilst these are only in draft form, they indicate the direction of nature recovery in relation to Taunton's blue infrastructure and are helpfully supported by numerous detailed measures.

## Phosphates in Somerset

The Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar Site is in an unfavourable condition due to nutrient loading, particularly phosphates resulting in eutrophication: the process by which water becomes overly enriched with nutrients resulting in excessive growth, as indicated by algae for example. The Council is committed to achieving phosphate neutrality in all new developments to address this problem.

The phosphate issue does not affect all development - it is primarily residential development or development that will produce additional waste water to waste water treatment plants).

Consequently, Somerset Council is not able to grant planning permission for new developments within the catchment that will add to phosphates unless it can be clearly demonstrated that they will not increase nutrient loading to the protected area.

Given the Garden Town vision for growth, this is a very significant challenge and a Somerset Nutrient Strategy is in development, which will identify both short-term solutions to help clear the current backlog of planning applications held in abeyance, and longer term solutions to address the deliverability of existing and future growth commitments. Interim solutions have been developed including a phosphate credit scheme with work also underway to produce a Somerset Nutrient Strategy. Somerset Council has recently been awarded capital funding of £9.6m via

the Nutrient Mitigation Fund to increase the supply of phosphate mitigation projects to unlock impacted developments in affected catchments including the River Tone.

The Taunton Waterways Strategy does not aim to replicate the measures that are likely to be identified by the Somerset Nutrient Strategy, but it will help to establish governance, facilitate collaborative working and should generate a stronger footing for funding which will all be necessary to implement solutions.

### **3.3 Other contextual strategies, guides and reports**

The summary above identifies several of the key contextual commitments that frame or inform the Taunton Waterways Strategy and Guidance but, with the exception of the TSFAIP does not reference flood alleviation strategies. These are referenced within the Management and Maintenance Plan that is

summarised in Section 6 and included in full as Appendix B.

Other relevant documents include but are not limited to:

- The emerging Mobility Strategy, prepared by WSP
- Taunton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan
- Connecting our Garden Communities
- Somerset Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- Somerset Cultural Strategy
- Local Transport Plan
- Taunton Heat Network Masterplanning and Early Feasibility Study
- Somerset Tree Strategy

These emphasise the point that the Taunton Waterways Strategy is part of a continuum of evolving information and should be used in that context, being both informed by existing information and informing the production of emerging and future reviews and strategies.



Town Bridge