

Assessment of Taunton - The Vision for Our Garden Town

April 2019

Introduction

This note is a brief analysis of the Taunton Garden Town Vision document on behalf of Arts Taunton. We've assessed it against four criteria.

- Does the vision set out the right urban design principles?
- Does it appear to have been informed by reasonable community and neighbourhood engagement?
- Does it look deliverable?
- What suggestions for improvements and next steps might you want to make?

Key components of the vision

The vision appears to be based on a well-conceived analysis of Taunton's current past, present and possible future. There is little specifically to object to though there are some important themes and frameworks missing or apparently de-prioritised. These omissions beg some questions about the strategy and the journey. And, of course it is always simpler to get a vision document right than the physical, procedural and political reality.

As an aside, the vision does not reference the government's 10 key qualities for a garden community as set out in their August 2018 note. Is there a risk that not including these may leave you exposed when it comes to bidding for Homes England money?

To remind you, the vision outlines five key themes. It is noticeable that the detailed descriptions of every theme in the document references greenery or the natural environment.

1. Celebrate and reinforce the history and culture of Taunton.
2. Increase the quality and quantity of green spaces and corridors in Taunton.
3. Improve walking, cycling and public transport into and within the town.
4. Improve the quality and environment of existing and future neighbourhoods.
5. Create a more dynamic and prosperous local economy.

Key things we like in the vision and process

- *The sustained and passionate call for an intense 'greenification' of the town.* The planting of street trees and creation of numerous green spaces to link existing parks and countryside is an admirable vision. This has a real focus throughout the document, with an emphasis on joining up the green spaces of Taunton along with improving waterways for recreation, tourism and wildlife. This can only be a positive addition to Taunton. There may also be some scope for integrating these areas with the theme of 'moving cleaner' by creating green routes for active travel.

- *Refocusing of the town centre from a through road to a place for people.* The intention to eliminate through traffic from the town centre is, in our judgement, entirely right. Towns that are easier to move in without heavy traffic on every street tend to have more visitors, visitors who stay longer and more prosperous shops. However it does beg the question: how will this be accomplished? How will it be sequenced? And how will more visitors reach the town sustainably? There is an encouraging early-stage sketch map that highlights poor walking and cycling pinch points within the town, but what about people commuting from the surrounding area? What steps will be taken to build-out routes from there? And how will shop keepers and businesses be reassured that this can be accomplished without damaging their businesses (which it certainly need not do)?
- *The right intentions regarding the urban extension form.* The vision is of a collection of urban extensions linked to the regeneration of the town centre, effectively a re-branding of the whole town. This seems like a sensible approach. Throughout the vision there are hints at building greater density residential living near transport hubs, more mixed-use developments within the town centre and a desire to use a local palette of materials in new construction. These 'hints' might be more prominent, but at least the overall vision has clearly been informed by thinking about the town's past, present and potential future.

Our key concerns and suggestions you may want to make

Our overriding concern with the document is what has been left out rather than what has gone in. The two key gaps are (1) urban design vision and (2) process.

- *There is a gap where urban design should be.* In reality, much of the garden community will grow through the urban extensions surrounding the edge of Taunton. The document alludes to new garden communities without any reference to the density of dwellings there may be or indeed the block, lot and street pattern in which buildings will be organised. There should be more clarity on the design principles and urban form that the new extensions will take. The grave risk without this commitment is that new development becomes typical volume housebuilder drive-to cul-de-sacs.
- *Focus more on the design, size, enclosure and accessibility of public and green spaces.* The current focus for public spaces is on creating artwork to galvanise them. Based on our literature review public art is actually of fairly limited use. Unless you get very lucky it does not reliably drive people to visit and stay on its own. A greater focus on what form and style the new public spaces within the garden communities should take would probably be more meaningful.
- *Commit to creating housing with the Somerset character.* Whilst there is reference for a desire to use local materials in the document and a page depicting some traditional streetscapes, there should be a stronger commitment to local vernacular street, block and building design (unless that is rejected by local residents which seems unlikely). The risk without this commitment (as above) is that new development becomes typical volume housebuilder drive-to cul-de-sacs.
- *Single use business parks are not conducive to a lively town centre and sustainable town.* Referencing the concept of business parks, such as the Nexus 25 development, goes against many of the principles and values held within the document with regards to sustainability and character. Although these have been a standard development patten for over 30 years, they are not sustainable and not actually aligned with the data on where most people want to work. A mixture of residential, office and leisure building within urban extensions is far more likely to prove popular, valuable and sustainable than a development based solely on one use.

- *More clarity on the way to get there, and specifically co-design should be at the heart of creating new garden communities.* We feel that this is a significant oversight. Theme four of the vision document 'New Garden Neighbourhoods' does not even mention co-design as an underpinning principle. Only when discussing improving existing neighbourhoods do residents get a chance to 'work with' designers. See appendix three for a summary of the Create Streets co-design process when designing new garden communities.
- *Eliminate unnecessary through traffic.* There are no explicit processes to disincentivise cars from driving into the town centre in the vision document. For example, there could be a desire to reduce the number of town centre non-disabled parking spaces. They correctly highlight the main challenge being the dominance of through traffic. However, there are no indications of how they would go about this, i.e. by utilising bus/cycle only streets.
- *There is no clear ambition for the level of public transport provision.* Other than a 'desire for more integrated transport' there is no specificity about what this could mean. For example, a bus system with a frequency high enough to 'turn up and ride.'
- *Work with and clearly state the key economic partners and their desires.* The final theme regarding the economy has far less detail than the other themes. It is surprising that there is no explicit vision co-created with Somerset University as to its future role within the town. Moreover, there is no scrutiny into how Taunton could benefit economically from the nearby cities of Bristol and Exeter. What kind of people could move to Taunton from Bristol? What barriers to trade exist between Taunton and Bristol?

Conclusion and key feedback you might want to give

This is a broadly positive vision that we would largely endorse. It is right to worry about greenery, distinctive quality, movement and use. However, it has a large lacuna at the centre of its urban vision which needs filling. Otherwise there is a grave risk of a built form that will look and feel just like any other housing estate up and down the country – and very different from the vision's intentions.

Clearer economic goals (above all regarding links with the university and local businesses), more clarity on preventing through traffic in the town centre and relatively less focus on out of town business parks would, we judge, also be to the long-term benefit of Taunton and its new garden town status. Ultimately the process of creating the vision of Taunton garden town needs to involve the entire community throughout its development lifespan. This change in process needs to be part of the vision. This is the key feedback we would present.

Appendix one: Government guidance for garden communities

The introduction on page five of the vision states: 'There are no prescriptive guidelines set out by central Government.' However, in August 2018 MHCLG produced a [short garden communities note](#) outlining 10 key qualities for a garden community. Is there a risk in not referencing these? An extract of the 10 qualities can be seen below for reference and for comparison to the vision document.

- a. *Clear identity* – a distinctive local identity as a new garden community, including at its heart an attractive and functioning centre and public realm.
- b. *Sustainable scale* – built at a scale which supports the necessary infrastructure to allow the community to function self-sufficiently on a day to day basis, with the capacity for future growth to meet the evolving housing and economic needs of the local area.
- c. *Well-designed places* – with vibrant mixed-use communities that support a range of local employment types and premises, retail opportunities, recreational and community facilities.
- d. *Great homes* – offer a wide range of high quality, distinctive homes. This includes affordable housing and a mix of tenures for all stages of life. 7
- e. *Strong local vision and engagement* – designed and executed with the engagement and involvement of the existing local community, and future residents and businesses. This should include consideration of how the natural and historic environment of the local area is reflected and respected.
- f. *Transport* – integrated, forward-looking and accessible transport options that support economic prosperity and wellbeing for residents. This should include promotion of public transport, walking, and cycling so that settlements are easy to navigate, and facilitate simple and sustainable access to jobs, education, and services.
- g. *Healthy places* – designed to provide the choices and chances for all to live a healthy life, through taking a whole systems approach to key local health and wellbeing priorities and strategies.
- h. *Green space* – generous, accessible, and good quality green and blue infrastructure that promotes health, wellbeing and quality of life, and considers opportunities to deliver environmental gains such as biodiversity net gain and enhancements to natural capital.
- i. *Legacy and stewardship arrangements* – should be in place for the care of community assets, infrastructure and public realm, for the benefit of the whole community.
- j. *Future-proofed* – designed to be resilient places that allow for changing demographics, future growth, and the impacts of climate change including flood risk and water availability, with durable landscape and building design planned for generations to come. This should include anticipation of the opportunities presented by technological change such as driverless cars and renewable energy measures.

Appendix two: Suggested missing framework on urban design and density

If you are encouraging future evolutions of the vision to be clearer on urban form and design, you might find the list below helpful. This won't be perfect for the Taunton Garden Town but it does reflect research into relationships between urban form with wellbeing. It is taken from our book, *Heart in the Right Street*.

1. **Greenery.** Frequent green spaces inter-weaved into the city either as private gardens, communal gardens or well-overlooked public spaces between blocks and where people really need them and frequent them. Large parks are necessary but need not be ubiquitous. Lots of street trees;
2. **Homes.** Some of the very real and valued advantages of suburban living (houses, private gardens, privacy) but at rather greater densities (think terraces of houses with some flats) and without the long commutes and consequent risk of isolation. Children preferably in houses not flats. As many houses as possible;
3. **Height.** Most buildings at human scale height. Sparing use of residential towers and only in city centres, for the rich, for the small number of people who seek them or where the local micro-climate is unimportant (their high energy usage and their malign local environmental impact is more defensible in hot countries). No children in high rise;
4. **Connectivity and streets.** Streets that 'plug into' the surrounding city. A well-connected, highly walkable, traditional street pattern of differing types and sizes with multiple junctions and route choices. Some streets should be pedestrian- or bicycle-only but most would be mixed-use with generous pavements wherever possible;
5. **Land use.** Mixed-use of residential, commercial and retail wherever possible and where traffic implications can be managed. Retail nearly always interspaced with commercial and dotted around primarily residential as far as density permits;
6. **Blocks.** Blocks that are neither too big nor too long. Buildings that appear to be buildings not entire blocks. Often narrow fronts with many doors and a strong 'sense of the vertical' to break up the scale of a terraced block. Clear fronts and backs with very clear internal private or communal gardens inside blocks. No deck access;
7. **Space.** Minimal internal semi-private space. No residential corridors. As few doors as possible off the same 'core.' External open space normally less than about 50m in breadth;
8. **Beauty and design.** Beauty really matters – any development that most people don't aesthetically like is missing a key trick. Must have a strong sense of place and 'could not be anywhere'. This will normally (though not always) include either a style or use of materials that at least references a place's history. A variety of street types, design, green spaces. Streets that bend and flex with contours of the landscape. Some surprises. Not designed by committee;
9. **Facades.** No long blank walls but either frequent front doors (ideally with modest front gardens) or shop fronts. 'Walking architecture' is more popular, more complex and more valuable than 'driving architecture.' Some front doors should have steps for social and public health reasons;
10. **Density.** Somewhere in the 'middle.' Dense enough to be walkable and to provide walkable shops and offices. But not so dense as to be overwhelming, to undermine wellbeing or to create problems of long-term maintenance costs. Fifty to 220 homes per hectare is probably right.

Appendix three: co-design process

- In consultation, residents give feedback on options. These options will have been designed by architects away from the residents. They are then presented to residents and voted on. In some versions of consultation, residents may have a vote on certain elements of the design. However, there is another way to do things: *co-design*. In co-design, the options themselves are worked up collaboratively – residents and architects sit down together, with pencils and paper, and work up the design together in a workshop. This type of co-design workshop is often known as a charrette.
- A co-design charrette is a collaborative event that engages local people with expert facilitation in co-creating spatial plans and designs for their place. It is a hands-on approach with stated goals that allows for feedback and design changes, important for gaining stakeholder understanding and support.
- During a charrette a neutral and multi-disciplinary team of facilitators and advisers treats everyone present as having an equal right to take part in the process. Physical, social, commercial and environmental issues are addressed holistically through a combination of sticky note dialogue workshops and ‘hands-on planning’ design sessions. The views of all members of the community, including young people, are sought and taken seriously and everyone is given a chance to exercise their creativity.
- Below is an example of a one-day charrette. This is drawn from the toolkit we at Create Streets drew up with JTP Architects (you can download the toolkit [here](#)).

The day before	Afternoon/Evening – Facilitation team site visit and briefing. Venue Setup.	
Day of Charrette	Morning: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walkabout with community members and briefing 2. Sticky note dialogue workshop 3. Lunch Afternoon: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hands-on-Planning 2. Group report back presentations 3. Way forward workshop 	Evening: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction 2. Sticky note dialogue workshop 3. Hands-on-Planning 4. Group report back presentations
Post Charrette	Team work to consolidate comments/ideas from participants, write-up key themes and draw illustrations.	
Report back event	Report back presentation using PowerPoint and exhibition of illustrative masterplan with adequate time for community feedback and discussion	

- Co-design tends to result in higher levels of support for the proposed development as any disconnect between residents and professionals is worked through together, towards a final design supported by all. Charrettes can be major exercises over several days or they can be a series of shorter meetings over time.

- The fact that there are open discussions about the design means that disagreements can be discussed and debated in the open. It's very important that you are as up front as possible about the constraints of the process.
- It's also worth adding that quite a lot of firms that 'say' they do charrettes don't, or at least not in the sense that we mean it here, of co-design. We've observed quite often a so-called charrette turning into something that is far more about designers' agendas. In some ways though, a charrette isn't so far away from an open consultation process, which can of course also be open and up-front about constraints. But in a charrette the design work is carried out there and then, in front of people, using their 'live' ideas and input. This tends to mean that those involved have a strong sense of ownership over the final design. It is not merely one of many designs done by an outsider that they have responded to – instead it is theirs, and their neighbours'.
- It is key that what is designed in the session is informed by an accurate understanding of the constraints of the process – so very important work needs to be done in advance of the session to make sure these are clear and can be shared accurately in the workshop.

Co-design and charrettes have been used in numerous schemes in the UK in recent years

- *St Clements Hospital, London* was a listed site and a former workhouse infirmary in Bow, East London. In 2012, the Mayor of London decided to establish London's first Community Land Trust (CLT) on the site. A community planning workshop was held over two days and over 350 local people joined in to help create a vision for the delivery of 250 new homes. The scheme has received numerous awards, including two at the 2014 National Housing Awards, and the Housing award at the 2018 Civic Voice Design Awards.
- *Kew Bridge, London*: This 0.7 hectare site had been empty for over 10 years. A co-design process was undertaken, with over 100 attendees at two workshops. The workshop focused on a thorough explanation of the council's planning brief requirements for the site and further guidance that had been given by a Planning Inspector report which had rejected previous proposals on the site. By being clear about the parameters, expectations were not unduly raised. Instead, participants worked within the framework of the constraints, and ultimately led to a development of 308 new homes plus a range of mixed uses including a pub, restaurants shops and offices.
- In *Graylingwell, Chichester* an empty plot on a former asylum was the subject of a co-design process that involved over 500 local residents and community groups in the preparation of a detailed masterplan. Existing listed buildings have been integrated into a new mixed-use development which includes new community facilities.
- *The Village at Caterham, Surrey*. The old Caterham Barracks site was bought by Linden Homes. A Charrette process involving over 1000 local people took place. It led to the creation of a sustainable, mixed-use neighbourhood, including 361 mixed tenure homes. The development value of the site was increased by over £50 million and delivered a range of community assets.
- *Wick and Thurso, Scotland*. In 2013 the Highland Council ran Charrettes in Wick and Thurso (sponsored by the Scottish Government), to enable local people to shape the future growth of their towns. Members of the public and local stakeholders worked in collaboration with Council officers and project consultants to develop a vision and masterplan for each town, focused on housing and economic development.
- *Whitesands, Drumfries*. A sustainability-focused regeneration of the town centre was undertaken by drawing up a master plan using a co-design 'charrette' process. A series of events over a one

week-period involved presentations, workshops, walkabouts and discussions, and included meetings with key stakeholders about the relevant policies and constraints on the site.

- *Nansledan, Cornwall* (we have written about this development in our publication [A Place to Call Home](#)). The co-design process began with a two-day briefing session in May 2004. Its aim was to clarify expectations for participants, and to begin to consider the main issues likely to be discussed for which technical information would be required. This was attended by several stakeholders including community groups, local authority councillors and officers, and others who had expressed an interest in the development. This in turn led to six working groups who worked up key themes for the development over the next six months.

The crucial workshop took place between 25th and 29th October 2004, at a local school. Informed by the working groups, it produced principles for the structure, scale and layout of the town, as well as strategic agreement on mixed-use places and communities, great streets, public transport and adaptability of building design. It recommended a density of 36 homes per hectare. The process brought together key local stakeholders: statutory agencies and authorities, the landowner, the master-planner, the local community and voluntary groups. In total, there were over 140 attendees. Through an 'intensive workshop,' the participants collaborated to articulate a vision for the site that did not suffer from the 'design disconnect' between designers and most members of the public. The report from the workshop explained that the process involved a high level of technical input, and that 'fundamental to the process is the intensive design enquiry; every issue is tested by being drawn.' Problems could be raised, discussed and resolved, as and when they arrived, throughout the process. The co-design came up with a concept proposal underpinned by a set of clear principles. The specific spatial vision that emerged, in 2004, was for an urban extension of 1,200 homes, over 33 hectares, with a large park around Chapel Stream flowing through the middle. The key agreed principles for the design of neighbourhoods, in the growth area, evolved over time, but were important in establishing a direction of travel.