

# **Full Council Meeting – 7 December 2021**

## **Report of Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts – Leader of the Council and Communications**

### **11 November – Poppies to Paddington**

On 11 November I was invited by Great Western Railways to help mark Remembrance Day and put a wreath on the train from Taunton to Paddington Station on behalf of the communities of Somerset West and Taunton. The wreaths were put on the train from Taunton Station at 0722 and were then carefully carried to London and placed at the war memorial on platform 1, creating a display of remembrance for all the communities served by our intercity trains.

### **Armistice Day – Two minutes' silence**

I attended to observe the two-minute silence in Taunton Town Centre. It was positive to see so many people paying their respects and ensuring we never forgot and educate our children on the sacrifices that have been made.

### **Appointment of new CEO**

At the Full Council meeting of Somerset West and Taunton on 16 November the appointment of the new CEO was approved.

The previous CEO, James Hassett, left SWT at the end of Oct, having joined the Council when it was formed in 2019. James steered the new council through the wide-reaching transformation programme started by the former Taunton Deane Borough and West Somerset Councils.

He also spearheaded the Council's regeneration programmes for Coal Orchard and Firepool, rebooted the Garden Town vision and kick-started the commercial investment programme generating additional income for the authority. All this and more while ensuring there were no cuts to services, and that staff and communities were supported through the Covid-19 pandemic.

We have now appointed Andrew Pritchard as our new CEO after a competitive recruitment process and he will look to guide us through the challenging months ahead balancing our ambitious plans and local government reorganisation.

### **Local Government Reorganisation**

Since my last report the Local Government Reorganisation programme is making good progress continuing to work very collaboratively across all the councils building the programme workstreams and plans to ensure that all councils come together safely and legally on 1 April 2023.

The first Joint Committee has been held at Mendip District Council where we considered and signed off the Terms of Reference amongst other actions. All five Council Leaders were present with some good engagement and questions for Councillors across the whole of Somerset, joining either virtually or on site. Some elements of the draft Structural Change Order were also considered and, at the time

of writing this report, we still await the Secretary of State's decision on whether the election date will be 2022 or 2023. We are also waiting for final confirmation if the Unitary Council will be a Continuing Authority. All Group Leaders have provided their group's position to the Secretary of State on these two important matters.

### **External Operations Highlights**

Two new 50kw EV charge points have been installed at Deane House. The chargers are available 24/7 and are in addition to 50kw points installed by the Council in Minehead, Dulverton and Blackbrook. These chargers were used over 1500 times between July and October.

The installation of 7kw charge points in the Belvedere Road car park is also underway.

The Asset Management team have completed an easement and land transfer at Norton Fitzwarren, which will enable SWT to deliver a new playing field for the village next year.

The Marine Management Organisation have started the statutory 28-day consultation period for the permanent coastal defence scheme at Blue Anchor. The scheme is funded by SCC, but as the Coastal Protection Authority, SWT will be undertaking repair work to the cliff next spring to prevent future loss of sections of the B3191 as well as nearby local businesses.

### **District Councils Network Conference – 21/22 October**

On 21 and 22 October I attended this year's DCN conference which was held in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. It was good to listen to the keynote speakers talk about differing issues that are affecting district councils across the country. I particularly found the seminar on local government organisation useful listening to how Cumbria and Yorkshire District councils are coping with reorganisation and their experience.

### **Communications**

We have been keeping our communities informed of Council decisions and initiatives through a range of channels including our own newsletters and social media, as well as through press releases to the regional media and in local radio and television interviews.

Among the news items highlighting the Council's strategic priorities and services since July we have demonstrated that we are an organisation that –

Values its staff with a highly commended place at this year's MJ Achievement Awards in recognition of work to support neurodiversity in the workplace.

- Looks after its customers, setting up a dedicated project team to help customers out of Council Tax and Business Rate debt.
- Supports businesses with Business Revitalisation Grants of up to £10,000 available as a boost for key businesses that have been directly or indirectly impacted by Covid restrictions
- Cares for the community with Community Employment Hubs providing support to people both in and out of work, including long-term job seekers,

employees at risk of redundancy or those seeking new skills or a career change.

- Boosts local charitable and voluntary organisations through a range of grants including the Taunton Youth and Community Centre fund to support youth projects; our Small Grants Fund providing a lifeline for charities, voluntary and community groups; and our Somerset West Lottery initiatives to raise money for registered good causes.
- Is delivering major schemes - welcoming the first residents to the Coal Orchard development; consulting on detailed plans for our flagship site at Firepool while accommodating the new NHS vaccination centre relocated from Taunton Racecourse; and moving a step closer to developing railway stations in Wellington and Cullompton with the announcement of funding in the Government's autumn budget.
- Considers climate change - providing free tap water refilling stations in Taunton, Minehead and Wellington in partnership with Wessex Water and Somerset County Council to help reduce plastic consumption; working with industry leaders to save water by converting a number of gents' urinals to waterless systems; accelerating the roll-out of Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points in council-owned car parks, introducing electric pool cars and working with partners to help people make the switch to electric vehicles; and offering free trees to town and parish councils, including unparished areas.
- Takes pride in its open spaces – receiving awards in Minehead, Taunton and Wellington in this year's South West in Bloom competition; and retaining seven Green Flag Awards at our parks and open spaces.
- Provides housing for all – starting delivery of a major redevelopment scheme under the North Taunton Woolaway Project; consulting on planning for zero-carbon homes in Taunton; and adopting an accommodation strategy and delivery plan to support single homeless people and end rough sleeping in the district by 2027.
- Protects our heritage - working with the new owners of Sandhill Park to ensure the historic Grade II\* listed building is preserved after years of neglect: working with Historic England, the South West Heritage Trust and Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council to protect Norton Hillfort- a nationally important scheduled ancient monument; working in partnership with the National Trust, Historic England and other stakeholders on a major restoration project to save Wellington's landmark memorial; and taking major step towards the preservation of the historic Tone Works site in Wellington.
- Builds up our coastal communities – completing work to replace a section of the wall at East Quay, Watchet: marking the official opening of the new Snazaroo building on commercial premises delivered by the Council at Rainbow Way, Minehead; adopting an innovative beach safety app to safeguard visitors and residents to Minehead; expanding the e-scooter trial to Minehead.

There have also been some significant changes for our communications team to keep our residents and business informed of – not least the departure of James Hassett as CEO followed by the recent appointment of Andrew Pritchard to the role; and the Government decision to opt for one unitary council and subsequent arrangements being put in place to create a new council for Somerset.

All press releases issued by the Council are also followed up with social media posts and we share content from partner organisations including the district and county councils, the Somerset Waste Partnership, the NHS and Public Health.

Our social media specialist has been working with teams throughout the council to support a range of projects, helping to create content for sharing externally and internally. Social media also plays a key role in supporting and promoting civic events.

The Civic Office has been supporting the Mayor of Taunton and the Chair of SWT with a variety of public engagements and events. These have included organising our own annual ceremonies to mark Emergency Services Day and Remembrance.

Most recently the Mayor, accompanied by the Deputy Mayor, attended the Christmas lights switch on in Taunton signalling the start of a programme of festive events and activities.

There have been some changes in the way that the organisation communicates internally with staff; shifting from daily emails to a bi-weekly email combining messages – emails are now limited to urgent messages and staff are self-serving their information on the new intranet.

From the earliest planning stages of the project back in May, the new Intranet was successfully launched in September. Internal Comms played a huge part in this and since the launch has maintained and updated daily the content on the Home page, Communications Site, Unitary Site and the News Portal as well as supporting other editors with their sites.

Internal Comms has also engaged with staff during the project stage and since the launch; running a competition to encourage people to try out the new intranet giving their feedback which was then acted upon and responded to.

Another change has been taking on the creation of weekly screen savers to promote internal comms (these were previously out-sourced to a graphic design company), and with a new video-making tool, Internal Comms has been able to produce engaging videos to share with staff.

Some recent campaigns Internal Comms has helped with include the Nutrition Programme for Internal Ops staff, launch of Microsoft Spotlight Sessions and HR campaigns such as Organisational Health Check, induction for new staff and various wellbeing campaigns. Internal Comms is currently working on raising awareness of the Cultural Development Team.