

Full Council Meeting – 8 February 2022

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

Local Government Reorganisation

Local government reorganisation continues to move at pace with the Structural Change Order, the legal mechanism to implement change, making its way through the Houses of Parliament. Assuming the Structural Change Order passes through the House, and there is no suggestion it will not, our understanding is that it will come into effect sometime in March 2022. That is a landmark as it formalises the structures to ensure the new council comes into being with effect 1 April 2023. It will also clarify the timing of Parish and Town Council elections and confirm the elections for a Taunton Town Council can take place in 2023. Over the coming months I have asked for specific Member briefings to be planned and I hope to see you there for the up to date view of the programme.

As we draw closer to vesting day on 1 April 2023 more of our officer time will be drawn into setting the conditions for a successful new council, whilst also ensuring we close Somerset West and Taunton Council in good order. Our ambition is to ensure that we hold Somerset West and Taunton as an example of 'what good looks like'.

Budget Update

I am pleased to highlight the work we have progressed on the 2022/23 Budget. Despite the significant reduction in general funding and increasing cost pressures we have a balanced budget for next year. COVID continues to have a significant impact on our finances, both directly and indirectly. For example, demand for off-street parking remains much lower than before the pandemic and we have reduced the income budget by £1.5m as a result. The impact on the economy and availability of labour and supplies are driving inflationary and market-driven cost increases.

Our strategy seeks to protect and support ongoing service delivery and provide additional capacity where need it to provide a stable footing as we transition to a new unitary council for Somerset.

We have included £1.375m in the Budget to fund our contribution towards the £16.5m implementation budget for establishing the unitary council as well as funds to employ extra help if needed to ensure business as usual services are maintained and the implementation goes smoothly.

We continue to invest in our key priorities including climate change, with £1.5m allocated over three years to help deliver. And we are proposing a £300k Environmental and Leisure Improvements Fund to support various initiatives to enhance the district amenities and public spaces.

Our commercial investment strategy is working and is expected to contribute net income of £4.5m next year. This is vital funding to fund the services we deliver to our communities, businesses, and visitors.

We are proposing to increase Council Tax by 2.95% which is £5 on a Band D property, to contribute to total costs of our services. 63% of properties in the district are in Bands A-C and accordingly will see a smaller increase on their bills.

We are presenting a fully funded balanced budget for the final year of Somerset West and Taunton with prudent reserves supporting financial resilience as we transition to unitary. A positive position as we look to the future.

Country Park

Somerset West and Taunton Council has agreed a 125-year lease with Cheddon Fitzpaine and West Monkton parish councils to manage Monkton Country Park, known locally as Maidenbrook Country Park. The Council's Executive Committee approved the joint lease agreement for the site at Yallands Hill between Taunton and Monkton Heathfield.

Monkton Country Park was acquired by the former Taunton Deane Borough Council from the Crown Estate in October 2018. The freehold asset will remain with SWT so the country park remains in public ownership. The agreement to lease the land jointly to Cheddon Fitzpaine Parish Council and West Monkton Parish Council for a 125 year period at £1 per annum rent will enable them to manage the park on behalf of SWT with clear delineation of responsibilities.

I am delighted that we have been able to reach this lease agreement. It has been a long held ambition of both SWT and the parish councils to secure this country park and protect its green open spaces for the future and long term benefit of our communities.

As well as being a valued community space, the country park is an important component of Taunton's status as a garden town.

It will provide green links to encourage greater use of pedestrian and cycle routes from the planned garden communities to the east (Monkton Heathfield) and west (Nerrols), as well as a north/south route improving connections with Hestercombe House, the Quantock Hills AONB and the Taunton urban area.

Communications

It continues to be a busy time for communications with lots of Council initiatives, messages and events to publicise.

Throughout the festive period there were a number of incentives to support our traders including the free parking offer; the 3D animation in North Street, Taunton; the boost to traders in Taunton's independent quarter; and the enhanced high street cleaning programme in partnership with cleansing contractor, Idverde, covering town

centres and other high footfall areas in Minehead, Taunton, Watchet, Wellington and Wiveliscombe.

Early this year we have been keeping people up to date with our plans for a twelve-month trial enforcement scheme as part of the ongoing commitment to help keep our streets and public spaces free of litter; the discretionary grant scheme to provide financial support to businesses in the hospitality sector; and our budget setting for the coming financial year - the last ahead of the creation of a new unitary authority in April 2023.

Most recently Somerset West and Taunton Council received two of the iconic benches being placed around the country in a campaign encouraging people to talk about grief. The benches gifted by the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) and Netflix to mark the launch of the third and final series of the hit show After Life have been installed by our open spaces team at our green flag award winning parks in Blenheim Gardens, Minehead, and Vivary Park, Taunton.

SWT continues to work with the other district councils and the county council to issue communications on joint initiatives. Recently we have reported on the dedicated helpline set up to provide a single point of contact for Somerset residents at the start of the coronavirus pandemic which has now taken more than 17,000 calls; and work the districts have achieved with the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) to secure funding to deliver energy efficiency improvements to park homes across Somerset.

Communications are also issued by SWT for various partnership projects such as the Health and Safety talks discussing dangers on building sites, being delivered by the Council and construction contractor ENGIE at local primary schools; and our work with Social Enterprise lender, Lendology, to provide low interest loans to homeowners wishing to increase their energy efficiency.

All press releases issued by the Council are 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 as a matter of course.

Our social media specialist has continued working with teams throughout the council to support a range of projects, helping to create content for sharing externally.

The Civic Office has been supporting the Mayor of Taunton and the Chair of SWT to carry out a variety of engagements including:

- The Mayor's Carols Around the Bandstand which raised just over £740 for the Mayor's Charity, Cancer Research UK - Taunton Branch. The event was supported by Taunton Concert Band, Let's Sing, Taunton Deane Male Voice Choir and the West Somerset Singers.
- The Mayor's traditional Christmas Visits on Christmas Eve leaving gifts with the Emergency Services, the Samaritans, the Rectory Care Home and Musgrove Park Hospital. A teddy bear was left in the care of the midwives on duty to present to the first baby born on Christmas Day on the Mayors behalf.

Community events are beginning to pick up as COVID-19 restrictions ease and the Civic Diary is starting to look busy.

Planning is underway for this year's Platinum Jubilee commemorations. Although in its early stages, the Mayor and Chair will be taking part in the national Civic Tree Planting / Plaque unveiling on 11 March.

As well as the ongoing regular tasks, Internal Communications has been raising awareness of the work of Council staff focusing recently on the Business Analyst Team; and keeping staff informed of Council priorities, as well as changes to Covid regulations, HR and public health messages.

It has helped with several campaigns during December and January including the Nutrition Programme, the Leadership Development Programme, and wellbeing campaigns such as 'Get Outside this January'. Internal communications is currently supporting the launch of the Excellence Framework and working on staff engagement and feedback regarding the new Intranet.