

Full Council Meeting – 7 July 2020

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

1 Overview

In my annual report to council you can see the fantastic way that we have adapted and pivoted to support the community in many ways that a council does not traditionally look to do, I am proud of all the staff at SWT and how they have gone above and beyond in their roles, many undertaking new tasks in order to ensure that the vulnerable, residents, community and businesses were supported.

It is going to be challenging times ahead, but not only in our council have I witnessed passion and support for each other, but the community has been phenomenal in looking after each other in such tough times. I won't cover the many great achievements that SWT has performed (many of these are mentioned in my other report) however I will cover some of the headlines and what the immense amount of work has been as leader of a district authority over this time period.

2 Future of Local Government in Somerset

For the past 2 years, the District and County Council have been on a journey together to evaluate how the governance of Somerset should be structured. Earlier in the year the County Council decided to unilaterally undertake a review for a unitary authority and the Districts felt that this was not the best option and would work together on a collaboration model. This business case was starting to be worked upon along with a request to central government which we are still awaiting an invitation to submit our business case. Prior to lockdown I was attending a variety of external council meetings including meetings organised by SALC and our area panels to provide the district message to those interested parties. However when the pandemic occurred, I took the decision to halt all resources being placed on this project. As per my comments in the media, I do not feel that it is morally right to be working on a review of government structure when I was discussing the need for potentially additional graves, had our most vulnerable people in our community facing hardship and residents and businesses not sure if they could financially make ends meet. During the last three months I have however kept in close contact with my District colleagues and it has been business as usual in our relationship with the County Council. As we move in the ever changing situation that the pandemic presents us with and the situation stabilises across the South West, we will look to engage further in the business case. I have recently attended Creech St Michael Parish Council to discuss the current district position virtually where Somerset County Council are undertaking their own consultation on their proposed model and happy to attend any others.

3 Engagement with Local Councils

Just prior to lockdown, the Chief Executive and I were on our next cycle of visits to our local town councils, we spent time in Minehead, touring the area with local councillors to understand their concerns and look to put in place resolutions, this was followed with an informal meeting with the council and the BID. One of the requests was for the clearing of the promenade of the sand, which I am pleased to say has now occurred despite lockdown. In the coming weeks, we will be looking to restart these meetings even if we undertake them virtually.

My final external meeting before lockdown was a joint meeting held by Creech St Michael and West Monkton Parish Council, along with Cllr Rigby and others, we went on a tour of the area to understand the issues that the councils faced as part of the MH2 development and the consultation paper which is now for people to contribute to. As with attending parish councils, I am prepared to discuss any of the work that SWT is undertaking as I feel that these relationships and style of communication have led to positive engagement over the past year and will continue moving forward.

4 New way of working

Over the past three or more months, we have all had to adapt to a new way of undertaking our daily lives and our role as councillors has been more important now than ever. As a council we have moved to virtual meetings and briefings as it is important that we continue the projects and policies that play a pivotal role in our communities, whilst there may be a few technological teething problems, we have normally got their eventually through a little bit of determination and the occasional need for humour when our internet is not quite on the same page as us.

I have spent many many hours in a variety of briefings and discussions as to the impact that the virus is having on all walks of life, to provide feedback on our specific issues and also to look to decipher central governments messages in a fast paced ever changing situation. These have included briefings with the LGA, the DCN, our district and county colleagues, South West Councils to name a few. This is alongside attending many of the webinars that the LGA have put on, especially in recent weeks to provide further knowledge on the many challenges that are all facing.

5 Engagement with outside bodies

There are a variety of outside bodies that I have been engaging with over the past few months, there have been a variety of different meetings attended including South West Councils, discussing the challenges that are played across the region and how we can work together to raise our profile with central government.

The Hearts of the South West committee has met recently and discussed the economic recovery plan for all partners working together along with the LEP, at the most recent meeting, there was a change in Chair and Vice-Chair, with Val Keitch and Tudur Evans undertaking the role.

The Somerset Rivers Authority is due to meet shortly for the first time since lockdown, so I will be attending this in the coming weeks.

6 Communication

One of the important aspects about my role in the council over lockdown has to be a public face as to what we are doing and to convey our messages across to residents and businesses. We have increased our output on social media and looked to simplify the government messaging to provide clarity. The Executive and I will be continuing this to keep everyone up to date with the projects and work that the council has undertaken.

Another successful communication has been the collaboration with Taunton Chamber of Commerce for a virtual webinar in Covid which has been a success by all concerned discussing the support to businesses that we have given already alongside what the future is looking like.

7 Thank you

I would like to end with a thank you to all my fellow councillors in the support that has been given in a difficult time and how as a council we have shown a drive to ensure that we not only protect our most vulnerable in our communities but we look to support all residents and businesses but also that we exceed in those expectations.

Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts