

# **Annual Report 2019/20**

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

### **Introduction:**

There are moments in life that remind you why the work we do is so important. The stories I heard from the residents of our new multi-agency rough-sleeping project at Canonsgrove was one of those moments. During the coronavirus crisis good news has been hard to find but we, as a council, grabbed the opportunity to help our most vulnerable, work with partners and our local community to make a fundamental improvement to people's lives. The project was innovative, focused on our community and expertly run. It has made headlines on national media channels and outlets. It's this level of impact that I want to see in every area of Somerset West and Taunton as we continue to deliver for our communities, our residents and our businesses.

### **Background and context:**

We took control of the new SWT council in May 2019, the Transformation programme was ongoing and was not delivering either the benefits or financial savings outlined in the initial business case. There were significant backlogs in many areas of the council, including planning, customer contact, open spaces and housing. Numerous agency staff were increasing costs day by day and causing further instability due to a high turnover rate. Interviews for roles were still ongoing. Experienced staff had left through the voluntary redundancy programme. Voluntary redundancy payments were double the estimates, reaching £6 million. The promised technology was not in place. The new CEO had already taken urgent action in an attempt to alleviate some of the most pressing issues as they came to light.

As Leader of the new administration the urgent task was stabilise the authority and assess areas of priority against the newly revealed financial restrictions.

This has meant leadership, clear thinking and tough decisions. We produced a Corporate Strategy to deliver on our manifesto commitments and act as a guide us for at least the next 3 years. This gives the whole council focus to make Somerset West and Taunton a great place to live and work. It will also help us rebuild after the Covid-19 pandemic has wrought such damage across the area.

Of course, 2020 will now always be viewed against the backdrop of the most serious health and economic crisis faced by the world in generations. Our overarching corporate objectives remain the same – but they must be adapted and accelerated to deliver the results we need to secure our communities, jobs and a future for our young people.

Our strategy is clear and defines outcomes that will allow people to judge our ability to deliver:

- Making the District carbon neutral by 2030.
- Shaping and protecting our built and natural environment, supported by a refreshed Local Plan and developing our heritage, cultural and leisure offer including a vision and delivery plan for Taunton Garden Town.
- Improving the skills of the local workforce.
- Encouraging wealth creation and clean economic growth throughout the District, by attracting inward investment and enabling research and innovation.
- Providing adequate and affordable employment land to meet different business needs.
- Supporting town centres to meet the challenge of changing shopping habits.
- Supporting the enhancement of arts and cultural provision within the District.
- Facilitate the development of the Firepool site in Taunton.

What I outline below is a snapshot of the advances we have already made in the 20 months of the new council.

### **Development and Commercial Investment:**

Firepool –The multi-million pound site has already been brought back into community use and this scheme is moving forward at pace after more than a decade of inaction. A detailed master-plan was published, setting out how a multi-purpose venue, hotel, cinema, housing and an innovation centre could be housed there. The council has now put forward plans which would connect the Firepool site to the town's railway station via the boulevard. Firepool will be an exemplar for how modern mixed-use developments can be designed and delivered, including multi millions of pounds of climate initiatives.

Coal Orchard is now a visible feature of a rejuvenated Taunton. It is architecturally ambitious and will also bring the river back into the heart of community life. While it is part of the regeneration programme to improve lives and social mobility, it will also add value for the council and surrounding area, not only through the development itself but also through related economic GVA.

Supported our coastal communities with new projects in Minehead, working closely with their BID team, and supporting the East Quay project in Watchet with the Onion Collective. We also ensured funding was made available for both emergency and long-term repairs to the harbour wall at Splash Point.

As part of our new commercial investment strategy we secured the iconic Gaumont Theatre in Taunton and the adjacent bus station site from First Bus.

We are continuing to support the development of Nexus 25 and the major upgrade to Taunton Railway Station which will be major economic drivers in the next few years.

The Department for Transport has announced that Wellington station, closed in 1964, is now being considered as part of the "Restoring your Railway" scheme. This was the result of a collaboration between SWT and Mid-Devon District Council.

Ensured that one of the largest global suppliers of face paints – Snazaroo – was able to stay in Minehead with a new site.

A new leisure contract began in August 2019 which improved our offer to residents across SWT while also bringing revenue into the council.

The Open Spaces team also conducted a major clean up and regeneration operation to prepare Minehead for its shortened tourist season.

Moved ahead with Taunton town centre pedestrianisation which has increased footfall and improved life for shoppers. The challenge for our high streets is immense and we are coming up with innovative ways of supporting our independent traders. This will be discussed further as we detail our response and future plans following Coronavirus.

The Cricket World Cup placed Somerset as a leading global sporting venue. We won the ECB's best venue vote, and our promotional video was watched more than any other host. We have continued to support our events team with a renewed Christmas offer and the Taunton Ice Rink not only raised revenue directly for the council, it also provided our local businesses with increased numbers of visitors throughout the festive period.

### **Climate Change:**

Our Garden Town status represents an opportunity for us to play a key role in ensuring that the future of our plant is secure. SWT declared a climate emergency and we are passionate about making our area carbon neutral by 2030. This aim underpins the vision for the Garden Town and will influence our projects and initiatives as they are designed and delivered.

As an early example, as reported earlier, the masterplan for Firepool states the project will be carbon neutral overall. This is the clearest and most direct way we can have a positive impact on our planet.

We are working with partners across the county to develop a Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy. Alongside this Strategy we are developing our own local action plan for Somerset West and Taunton as a Council and an area as a whole. Our local action plan will supplement the county-wide strategy with more specific and local priorities and actions.

As a new administration, immediate action was taken to invest in the Taunton Park and Ride to stop Somerset County Council from closing it down. We not only kept it going, but expanded the service to include Thursday evenings and Saturdays where appropriate.

We kept our Green Flag status for our parks across the area – quite an achievement with the staff shortages in our parks team.

We secured funding for electric vehicle charging points across SWT for parishes to apply for and are looking at how we can further this in the coming months.

Action to mitigate against the impact of Climate Change is also continuing as we consider long-term solutions to flood risks bringing protection to residents, businesses, roads and infrastructure. The council and the Environment Agency have been working in partnership over a number of years to understand the impact of flooding both now and in the future, taking account of how climate change will affect flood levels in the River Tone over the next 100 years. The development of this long-term Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme (TSFAIS). This is along with our role in the collaborative Somerset Rivers Authority.

I am aware of the task that faces us in this regard and that we have a huge amount of work to do in this area.

### **Housing:**

Started fulfilling our commitment to more community housing with the regeneration of the North Taunton housing project.

We are building flats at Laxton Road to help address severe shortages in the local rented sector on a brownfield site.

We are working to deliver more affordable homes across the district and recently purchased new properties for rent in North Taunton. The two and three bedroom properties with private parking were built to a high specification by Summerfield Homes. Tenants who live in the homes at Pyrland Fields will benefit from affordable rents and a secure council tenancy which means they have a settled home.

At the same time, we are changing our debt management policy to stop our tenants falling into major arrears.

### **Coronavirus:**

After a challenging first year in office, but a year where we were delivering on our commitments to the people of SWT, our focus changed almost overnight. We became a front-line service protecting lives and livelihoods. Our response to the coronavirus crisis has been outstanding and I'm proud of the work of all our staff in adapting so quickly to the change. It's impossible to convey the thousands of individual pieces of work undertaken to help people across SWT, but the headlines are below:

- Made calls to 3,500 tenants and 600 other potentially vulnerable residents to check if they needed help
- Delivered food boxes to people who are shielded and those facing hardship

- Coordinated and supported a network of community and voluntary groups to ensure everyone has access to help in their community
- Provided Business Rate relief to 1,300 qualifying business rate accounts and removed their liability to pay rates for this year
- Provided Small Business, and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant funds totalling over £37m to 3000+ eligible businesses
- Opened applications for Discretionary Business Grants – which will pay out a further £2.1m in grants to eligible businesses
- Implemented the Council Tax Hardship Funding received from central Government and applied one-off £150 awards to 7,000 working age Council Tax Support claimants
- Reviewed and extended the awards for 285 Discretionary Housing Payment claims to provide ongoing help to people to pay their rent
- Recalculated 1,693 Housing Benefit claims providing additional support for people to help pay their rent.

We ensured public involvement in decision making remained with virtual committee meetings. Members of the public were able to register to speak and ask questions at meetings which were answered by the Portfolio Holder or followed up with a written response. The meetings are also live streamed so that members of the public can watch from home.

Maintaining momentum in planning has been an important part of our service provision. The Council has continued to accept pre application advice applications, site visits are being undertaken where appropriate with social distancing rules, and phone and conference calls are being undertaken.

### **Homelessness Provision:**

As mentioned above, our rough-sleeping project at Canonsgrove is a true nationally recognised success story.

Our area is not unique in having a significant number of rough sleepers.

As the pandemic struck and additional support came from the government to move rough sleepers to safety, we pulled together the numerous partners from our Streetwise programme to try something different from booking hotel rooms.

An empty student accommodation block just outside Taunton, Canonsgrove, became the site for a new multi-agency project involving our rough-sleeping team, Mental Health Services, Turning Point, Arc, the Salvation Army and many others. With the YMCA Dulverton Group stepping in to provide expert management of the facility, we diverted our existing rough-sleeping funds topped up by the government funding to kick-start the programme. People

were housed in a safe, socially distanced manner. Outdoor space was available for those residents who felt safer camping. We worked with every resident in drawing up an individual plan to help with primary care, mental health and drug and alcohol addiction – including providing alcohol and methadone where necessary.

As residents engaged with their personal plan, levels of addiction dropped. We had a man who was clean for the first time in 15 years. Another said his one-day supply of heroine lasted 8 weeks. Levels of depression and anxiety dropped. Not only was the cost of providing accommodation cheaper than a hotel, the wider economic and social savings were also substantial.

We engaged with our local Registered Providers and asked for their help. The response was excellent. A more flexible approach was agreed to accept people from our supported and temporary accommodation into social housing, resulting in some long-term homeless moving into settled accommodation for the first time in years.

We communicated early and openly with the local community, including Parish Councils to let them know what we were doing and how it would be managed.

With this combination of hard data and personal anecdote we are building a powerful case to government to keep this going.

The success of this model is making people sit up and take notice. A momentum is building across our partners, recognising that we cannot go back to how things were. Our challenge now is to coalesce this support into a sustainable long term commitment that brings physical and mental health support, addiction therapy, social care support, financial advice, tenancy development, education, skills and training into a model that allows flexible step up and step down between support pathways. One of the biggest successes of our work at Canonsgrove has been a wider understanding and acceptance that homelessness and rough sleeping is not a housing issue but a much wider one that can genuinely be addressed with a committed joined-up approach. This is a once in a lifetime chance to stop the revolving door we have seen for so many years.

We also have had great feedback from the brilliant work that is happening at The Beach Hotel in Minehead, supported by the YMCA Dulverton Group we are providing accommodation for families who are without accommodation and using the support mechanism that our partner is renowned for in helping families with the next steps available to them.

Our long-term measure of success will be how many people we can move into suitable accommodation, how many we keep clean, how many can find work and support themselves. With the additional financial stress on services across the country we hope that the risk of not funding the scheme will outweigh the risk of slipping back into old habits and old ways of managing the issue.

**Recovery:**

Our Economic Plan provides the strategy and policies for our economic recovery. Our aim is to be a low-carbon, clean, green and prosperous district that attracts high quality employment opportunities and encourages healthy lifestyles. The coronavirus hasn't changed that ambition and we must not lose sight of it. We are leading the way in providing a recovery request to the government, which is a collaboration by all of the Somerset district councils and the county council led by our CEO. We will be discussing this further in the coming weeks, as to how we need Government support and review of some of their policies to ensure that we can encourage the area to flourish.

Our recovery is not just about the economic it is about how we work as the anchor in the community and how we engage with our residents, this is an ever evolving work and this will be clarified as we progress coming out of lockdown however we must build on the relationships we have created with our partner organisation and outside bodies over the past year, whether this is through the regular meetings that the CEO and I attend with town councils, our district council partners or voluntary sector organisations. These partnerships that we have developed over the past year have allowed us to pivot, adapt and work in the difficult challenges that the pandemic has presented us with in a more collaborative way.

We must use the pandemic as a "reset" button to make us think and act differently in the way we interact and engage with others as well as what our priorities are and how we achieve them