

Council Meeting – 30 July 2019

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

Section 1 – Introduction

- 1.1 This is my first report as Leader of Somerset West and Taunton Council. As you know, we have been in this role for about 10 weeks. It has been a fantastic experience. In terms of some of the highlights – the Cricket World Cup stands out as a real high as does Live in Somerset. In addition, I have been visiting various parts of the new district and will talk more about that later.
- 1.2 In terms of our achievements the expansion of the car park on Firepool and the softening of the landscape on this prime site has made a real difference to that area. Continued progress on the Coal Orchard site is a testament to all of our collective vision and hard work and we have also approved the construction of new social rent housing at Laxton Road.
- 1.3 We continue to progress plans in Watchet and we were able to quickly provide a temporary solution for the provision of teas, coffees and refreshments in Blenheim Gardens in Minehead as a result of the closure of the existing café. There is a real sense of momentum and change in the air for this new district.

Section 2 - Executive

- 2.1 I am hoping that all Members feel that we are operating in an open, transparent and, above all, collaborative way and it is my personal view that, despite some robust conversations and honest expression of views, we, as a Council, are demonstrating just how well we can work and deliver for our communities in this new spirit of co-operation.
- 2.2 Our Executive meetings started off a little bit bumpy but the recent meeting flowed and worked extremely well. We are meeting monthly to maintain pace in terms of our overall business and I am grateful for all of those Members who have attended, to both talk to the Executive and also express their views on key issues. I am hoping that the introduction of the Member briefings is a welcome addition to our way of working. So far, they have all been very well attended and have provided a great deal of information on key topics to Members. I think they are hugely valuable.

Section 3 - Chair of the Council

- 3.1 At the first meeting of Somerset West and Taunton Council on 22 May Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey officially took her position as Chair of the Council. Cllr Prior-Sankey chairs all Council meetings. Hazel has helped to ensure all

Council meetings run smoothly and run to time. This has also helped to better improve collaborative ways of working within the Council. Once again, I would like to thank all Members for the positive way they are participating in debate.

Section 4 - Corporate Strategy

- 4.1** Officers have been working with the Executive to begin to translate the administration's Manifesto into a new Corporate Strategy for the organisation. It is intended that the new Strategy will be taken through the Democratic cycle in September and be put before Full Council in October.

Section 5 - Service Delivery

- 5.1** Despite significant change and disruption due to the recent transformation process and new IT systems, service delivery is improving and we are seeing backlogs of work continuing to fall across Planning, Benefits, Revenues and Food Safety. Although we still have a way to go in some areas, particularly where there are staffing gaps to fill, plans are in place to improve and tangible progress is being made. We are particularly pleased with the progress being made on our Reception and call answering times where performance has improved significantly.
- 5.2** We continue to recruit staff to help stabilise the organisation and deliver services. This is going very well and there is a definite sense of energy that is coming back into the organisation as a result of these recruitments. Our Chief Executive Officer has worked to stabilise the organisation but is now looking to start driving significant improvements in service delivery across the piece.

Section 6 - Engagement

- 6.1** Over the last eight weeks the Chief Executive and I have been out and about engaging with Members and the community. I have recently visited sites in Minehead and Watchet plus sites in Wellington. As part of these visits I met with both District and Town Councillors and it was useful to hear their thoughts and any concerns in their respective areas. I will soon be visiting Exmoor and plan on continuing these visits on a quarterly basis.
- 6.2** I have been meeting with local businesses such as the Brewhouse and visited Musgrove Park Hospital.
- 6.3** I was very pleased to be invited to attend the Taunton Deane Business Awards which were held at Somerset County Cricket Club on 27 June and an informal gathering of Taunton Team Chaplaincy at North Street Church, Taunton to launch their new Chaplaincy Video.
- 6.4** I was also invited by Mendip District Council to attend Glastonbury Festival for a day. It was a great opportunity to learn about what goes on behind the scenes by Mendip District Council to ensure the event runs smoothly.

- 6.5** On Mon 24 June the Council held two ceremonies to mark Armed Forces Day – one at Deane House, hosted by the Mayor, Cllr Francesca Smith and one at West Somerset House hosted by the Chair, Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey. I was very proud to be part of the flag raising ceremony at Deane House. It was great to see so many veterans and representatives from 40 Commando, The Rifles, the Police, Fire Service, Ambulance Service, the High Sheriff and the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Somerset as well as Members and staff in attendance.
- 6.6** Other events I have attended include the launch of the Taunton Toads. There are 22 toads at different locations throughout the town, all with very different designs – do look out for them.
- 6.7** I was also delighted to attend the Annual Reception by 40 Commando held on 20 June at Norton Manor Court.
- 6.8** I had a brilliant time celebrating the friendship between Taunton and Konigsutter at the festivities organised by Cllr Dave Durdan. The FOK are made up of residents across the district and wider Somerset, showcasing what a wonderful area we live in but, most importantly, who look to develop cultural awareness, peace and relations between the two areas. I saw the marvellous Morris Men and Sweet Coppin Dancers and even had a go at Bhangra dancing.

Councillor Federica Smith-Roberts