

# **Full Council Meeting – 27 July 2021**

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

### **Future High Streets funding**

In May SWT was awarded just under £14m to help deliver its ambitious proposals to transform our high streets into vibrant hubs for future generations.

I am delighted that we have secured this funding which represents a real opportunity to enhance our retail environment and realise our aspirations for growth, creating a place where people want to live, work and shop. The award will enable the delivery of our ambitious regeneration plans, helping to protect and create jobs, and deliver opportunities and prosperity to our communities.

The award of £13.9m from the Future High Streets Fund will be used for Active Travel links in Taunton town centre including cycle and pedestrian improvements, as well as contributing towards to the redevelopment of Coal Orchard and Firepool.

The award includes a specific allocation towards an outdoor performance space (amphitheatre) at Firepool, which is part of the original public realm design for the site and is in addition to the multi-purpose venue proposal that is subject to ongoing feasibility studies and discussion.

SWT has been working with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to review and prioritise the projects after the provisional offer was made representing 69% of the original bid for £20.2m of funding.

### **Stronger Somerset**

On 15 June, one week on from positive support in the local poll, I met with the Leader of Sedgemoor District Council to discuss next steps in the establishment of a new Western Somerset unitary council.

Stronger Somerset, the plan for two councils, Western Somerset and Eastern Somerset, to replace Somerset's existing five county and district councils, was the overwhelming choice of local residents in the poll, winning 65% of the vote.

While we await the decision of the Local Government Secretary, Robert Jenrick, we must begin making arrangements to ensure a smooth transition. This will involve closer working together as two district councils and joint working with the county council.

We will need an agreed implementation plan in just a few months' time, so there is no time to waste and we have invited our colleagues from the county council to now join us in this important work.

The decision of the Local Government Secretary on the future of local government in Somerset is due before the summer Parliamentary recess on 22 July.

### **Somerset Green New Deal Economy Forum (Build Back Better)**

On Sat 22 May I attended an online event of the Somerset Green New Deal Economy Forum (Build Back Better).

The emphasis of this event was on our economy and in particular how we can all contribute locally and practically to help the transition to a green economy, with social justice and health and wellbeing at its heart

The intent is to create a shared sense of purpose and consensus across all political parties and communities and will support a regenerative approach to green jobs which will help deliver a thriving carbon neutral, innovative and fair Somerset by 2030 and it will:

- Set the national and local context.
- Showcase local examples of businesses transitioning towards zero carbon and fair and just employment practice
- Explore key issues for start-ups
- Build partnerships and identify sources of help.

### **Levelling Up Fund - A vision for Tonedale**

Somerset West and Taunton, in collaboration with community groups, businesses, residents and supported by Rebecca Pow, MP for Taunton Deane and many regional and national stakeholders, are proud to have submitted a bid into the Levelling Up fund.

The aim of this bid is to transform and sustainably regenerate the nationally significant heritage site at Toneworks and consolidate the green lung of Wellington with community and culture, people and ecology at the heart of the regeneration scheme for Tonedale.

The proposal seeks to deliver the next stage of repair of the Grade II Toneworks site, bringing a building that was close to dereliction, back into functional life with commercial, cultural and creative uses. The community land acquisition project connects the heritage mill sites, improving access and connectivity through neighbouring green and blue infrastructure whilst integrating a number of community led initiatives into the space, enhancing the natural environment and serving the residents of Wellington and beyond.

### **Action on Litter**

A staggering three skips have been filled with litter collected from residential streets, highway verges and open spaces across the district in just two months. SWT targeted problem areas throughout April and May to ensure our streets and open spaces are clean and welcoming for residents and visitors as we come out of lockdown.

A team of three litter pickers visited around 60 open spaces and estates in Taunton, Wellington and West Somerset so far and will be continuing their rounds over the coming weeks. This is on top of the normal work done by the Council's street cleansing contractor.

They have also been busy linking up with the grass cutting teams to litter pick the day before the verges are cut in problem areas such as the main routes into Taunton and Wellington, minimising the amount of rubbish that is shredded.

Each of the three 15-yard skips filled weighed approximately two tonnes when taken away for separation. This is in addition to ten shopping trolleys collected.

As part of the initiative to keep our district litter free the Council is calling on members of the public and community groups to join the fight against litter.

It has already supported six community groups who have held litter picks in Taunton, Wellington, Trull, Pitminster, Minehead and Exford, collecting approximately 25 bags of mixed waste.

I am grateful to these groups and individuals for taking the initiative and joining us in the fight against litter. The volume of litter collected by our team and the volunteers shows just how important it is that we tackle this problem together and encourage people to be more socially responsible.

### **The Great British Spring Clean**

Our neighbourhoods, parks and public spaces have become ever more popular with people taking outdoor exercise in line with Government advice during the past year.

Unfortunately, in some areas this has led to an increase in litter, so as restrictions ease and the nation prepares to come out of lockdown SWT will be making sure our streets and open spaces are clean and welcoming for residents and visitors, targeting problem areas such as residential streets, highway verges and open spaces.

We have some amazing open spaces in and around our towns and it is wonderful that so many people have taken the opportunity to get out and appreciate them. It has also been really heartening to see the community spirit that has grown in our residential areas.

We are always alert to reports of litter which Council staff and our contractors make every effort to clear up but it would be so much better for everyone's health and well-being if we can prevent the problem in the first place. Our aim is to educate, inform and empower people so that together we can make a difference and transform our streets, roadsides and open spaces for good.

From 28 May to 13 June 2021 SWT staff increased the tackling of litter in locations across the district. The Council's Open Spaces team worked to remove litter, overgrown vegetation and dead and damaged trees at Hankridge Nature Reserve to improve the light which will help maintain the health of the existing tree stock. SWT

has also reinstated the old paths which had been lost under thick mud over the years, as well as creating mounds which have been sown with wildflower seeds.

The work strikes a balance between the increasing demand for quality recreational areas and the needs of the local wildlife population in line with our commitment to give equal importance to ecological issues alongside climate emergency actions to provide a better future for everyone.

### **Meetings with Town and Parish Councils**

On 28 April myself and the Chief Executive met with Watchet Town Council to discuss any issues of concern as part of our regular quarterly meeting schedule. This is part of a rolling programme to meet with our town councils and our parishes councils (if they wish) to discuss common themes and address concerns or celebrate successes.

### **Communications**

Communications has continued to play an important role in keeping our residents and business informed of Council decisions and initiatives, promoting transparency and openness about what we do and how we spend their money.

Press releases highlighting the Council's strategic priorities have included progress on our commercial investment strategy, climate initiatives including the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points and the e-scooter trial expanding into West Somerset, the marketing of residential properties at our flagship Coal Orchard development and the award of Future High Streets funding to help realise our aspirations for growth.

There has also been a particular focus on keeping our streets and open spaces clean and litter free with regular releases giving details of work being undertaken by the Council and information on how our residents can help. These have included features on our taking pride in our parks and open spaces, responsible dog ownership, how to discourage gulls from scavenging food waste, and the amount of litter collected so far by staff and volunteers.

All press releases issued by the Council are also followed up with social media posts and images giving us an opportunity to reach a wider audience and tag partner organisations, raising their profile and ours.

We share content as a matter of course from partner organisations including the district and county councils, the Somerset Waste Partnership, the NHS and Public Health. We also share and support social media from community groups and organisations working with SWT across the directorates' particularly economic development, housing and localities.

Our social media specialist has been finalising videos introducing Executive Members. The aim is for these to be followed by regular update videos on projects being carried out by each of the portfolio holders.

Our specialist also works with teams throughout the council to support internal events and projects, and helping to create content and videos for sharing externally and internally.

Social media plays a key role in supporting and promoting civic events, working with the Civic Officer.

In May the Civic Office supported the Annual Meeting of Council where Cllr Hazel Prior-Sankey was re-elected as Chair and Cllr Richard Lees appointed as Vice-Chair.

The Taunton Charter Trustees also held their Annual Meeting where Cllr Sue Lees was duly appointed as Mayor of Taunton and we welcomed Cllr Brenda Weston as Deputy Mayor.

The Chair of SWT and Mayor of Taunton will be supporting the local branch of Cancer Research UK during their term in office.

A Remembrance Bench, purchased by the Charter Trustees, has been installed in Vivary Park in commemoration of the centenary of the Royal British Legion and those affected by the Coronavirus Pandemic. A small ceremonial blessing was held on 6 June following the D-Day 75 wreath laying at the Normandy Stone.

Two Armed Forces Day Flag Raising Ceremonies were held on Monday 21 June ahead of Armed Forces Day which fell on Saturday 26 June this year. The ceremonies took place at our main office sites – Deane House and West Somerset House and were hosted by the Mayor of Taunton and the Chair of SWT. Attendees included local veterans, representatives from 40 Commando and The Rifles alongside civic dignitaries.

The diary is starting to get busy with civic engagements again which is encouraging after more than a year of Coronavirus restrictions. Plans will soon commence for a Civic Service, Emergency Services Day and our annual Remembrance activities.

Following the gradual easing of restrictions the events and marketing specialist has been working with Environmental Health, the Somerset Covid Support Officer, and the Safety Advisory Group to ensure we are able to help event organisers to use our parks and open spaces to hold their events in a safe and controlled way in line with current Government Guidance.

It has been great to see the Taunton Independent Market return to Castle Green in Taunton which have been a huge success and saw a significant increase in the number of visitors to the town. The events and marketing officer worked with the event organiser to ensure she was able to hold both the April event which required a change in traffic management for the highway, and the May event which had to be delayed a week due to a bad weather forecast; a successful event also took place in July despite the weather.

In May, we were also able to welcome back the French Weir Fun Fair. This took place over the bank holiday weekend and saw a high number of visitors attending

and a number of positive comments on social media and at the event. Our events and marketing specialist worked with the event organiser to ensure they had all the relevant safety measures in place, and were able to proceed safely; also that notice was given to local residents and all previous concerns were taken into consideration.

We are working with organisers of a number of different events due to take place across the district this summer. These includes 'Bands in Blenheim Gardens', Taunton Pride, Taunton Fake Festival, Taunton Flower Show and Minehead Triathlon. Following the recent announcement from the Government in relation to the delay moving into step 4, there are likely to be some changes to some of these events and we are in conversation with organisers about how they will be adapting their planned event or whether they can still take place under the current Government Guidance.

A new Internal Communications Officer joined the team in May and has picked up the ongoing work of editing the Weekly News Round-up, hosting the CEO Team Talk, organising screen savers, checking and editing documents and sending out messages to staff. These regular tasks have involved liaising mainly with HR, Health and Safety and IT. Other work includes being part of the team developing a new Intranet for SWT and ensuring staff are aware of the most recent Annual Plan and how their work aligns to it.