

Full Council Meeting – 30 March 2021

Report of Councillor Benet Allen – Deputy Leader and Communications & Culture

COMUNICATIONS

The communications team has played a key role in getting information to residents and businesses throughout the Covid-19 crisis in the last year.

One of the priorities has been ensuring that Government, Public Health and NHS messaging is being widely shared through our channels – this has included changes in restrictions, the Test and Trace app, and vaccine roll out.

SWT has also been working with neighbouring district councils, Somerset County Council, other statutory bodies and partners on joint initiatives to support people across the county including the Somerset Coronavirus Support Helpline, employment of Covid Wardens, Active Travel arrangements; and employment, careers and skills support.

Communications has been a valuable resource in keeping our customers informed about the business grants schemes being administered by SWT on behalf of the Government; and in signposting our customers to other ways that SWT can provide help with council tax, housing and rate payments etc.

While our offices have been closed to protect our community and staff the Council has been delivering critical services and ensuring our most vulnerable residents are supported. Communications has helped to keep the public up to date with working arrangements and changes made to accommodate safe working practices including setting up virtual committee meetings and encouraging people to access services online.

It has worked with staff to establish and distribute regular newsletters targeted at specific audiences, for instance - parish councils, the voluntary sector and the business community.

Communications have been focused on the measures SWT has taken to our reopen our high streets safely and specific SWT initiatives to support our businesses and communities with economic recovery such as the Community Chest fund, the free ShopAppy offer and the £500,000 cash boost for town centres.

There has been much to promote in terms of business as usual and the successful delivery of SWT projects aligned to our corporate strategy priorities of climate change, housing and economic growth – plans for the first local authority homes to be built in Minehead for over 30 years, completion of the Council's first commercial units in West Somerset, Government approval for the Taunton e-scooter trial, and the progress of our flagship Coal Orchard regeneration to name a few.

As a result of the restrictions this year many events that would normally be marked with occasions and ceremonies were moved online, encouraging people to get

involved virtually including the switch-on of Taunton's Christmas lights, the Remembrance commemorations, VJ Day and VE Day commemorations. This has proved very successful and we will continue to use this platform in the future to support events and make them more accessible and inclusive for those unable to attend.

CULTURE

The Council's commitment to culture is clearly outlined in the Corporate Strategy, with the inclusion of a priority objective to "Support the enhancement of arts and culture provision within the District".

The Coronavirus pandemic over the last 12 months has had a devastating impact on the cultural sector. The Council continues to liaise regularly with partner organisations from the arts and culture sector, and is working collaboratively to prioritise immediate and short-term projects and activities to support the sector as it plans to re-open when permitted after lockdown measures are eased. A number of SWT Officers provide resource and support to the cultural sector, and several organisations have received SWT funding support during 2020/21.

Key activities during 2020/21 include:

The Cultural Strategy and an iterative delivery plan for 2021/22 is ready to be shared with Members in April – May.

Funding for cultural organisations / projects:

- Brewhouse Theatre – SWT Council has provided grant funding this year, and SWT Council has again confirmed its continued financial support for a key member of Taunton's artistic and cultural sector.
- Other cultural organisations / projects - during 2020/21 SWT Council provided c.£70,000 funding support for a number of organisations and some small cultural projects, including: Arts Taunton, Hestercombe, Take Art, The Museum of Somerset, CICCIC, Somerset Film & Video, and others.
- It is anticipated that new and innovative projects and activities aligned to the Cultural Strategy will be made possible through continued Council support throughout 2021/22.
- Engagement - SWT recognises the importance of the cultural and creative sector and has been actively engaging with key stakeholders and partners in a variety of ways and on a range of issues, for example:
 - the Leader, Executive Portfolio holders, and the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team meet regularly with Arts Taunton
 - the Cultural Forum (and a recently established Taunton Cultural Working Group, involving the Brewhouse Theatre, Museum of Somerset, Hestercombe House, and CICCIC) are working collaboratively with the council to develop projects and activities that deliver key objectives set out in the draft SWT Cultural Strategy. This strategy and emerging delivery plan is aligned to the Taunton Garden Town Vision and specifically its 'New shoots and blossom' theme which sets out the vision, challenges and opportunities for Taunton's arts, cultural, heritage and creative sector.

- A representative of the Taunton Cultural group now sits on a Town Centre working group (which advises on economic recovery funding proposals)
- Key representatives from the sector have been consulted on the Taunton Place marketing project (and other relevant projects and development / Garden Town plans)
- Firepool Multi-Purpose Venue – although this was included as part of the Taunton Future High Street Fund bid in 2020, it had to subsequently be removed from this funding package. Delivery of a ‘MPV’ remains an aspiration for Taunton, however this would form part of the later stages of the Firepool development programme.
- Creative industries - the approval of the SWT Innovation ‘framework for action’ in 2020 is set to present exciting opportunities across the District with the inclusion of a key cross-cutting theme for the emerging Digital and Creative ‘cluster’.