

# **Full Council Meeting – 30 March 2021**

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

### **Introduction**

Last year I wrote in my introduction about the reason the work that the Council does over and above its statutory responsibilities is so important to our communities. The drive behind this administration and Council is to make fundamental improvements to people's lives, especially the most vulnerable, ensuring we work with our partners and continue to be there when people need us. I am proud of all that we have achieved in the past year in this most difficult of circumstances and this is through the dedication and hard work of our staff and the strong vision that my leadership of this administration has given.

### **Coronavirus**

The past year has been challenging for all of us and my thoughts go out to those that have suffered loss or hardship. Somerset West and Taunton has been an anchor in the community through this pandemic with the different initiatives and projects we have led and supported others with. I have been in awe of all of our communities and the resilience they have shown but most importantly the spirit of helping thy neighbour and the "be kind" mantra and I hope that this continues as by working together, whether in our communities or in the council, we only achieve more. Our staff have been phenomenal whether it was through adapting our businesses as usual services so they continue, to the millions of pounds we have paid out in business grants, to thousands of calls to our vulnerable residents to check if they need our help. I am in awe of the work we have done. We still have a long way to go and we need to take the many learning that the past year has given us in order to not just build back better but to also continue the ambitious plans we have laid out for the whole district.

### **Stronger Somerset**

The consultation for Unitary has started and we are expecting a decision by the Secretary of State towards the end of the summer.

Central government invited all councils in Somerset to submit bids for a new unitary way of working in the county.

The District Councils – Sedgemoor, Mendip, South Somerset and Somerset West and Taunton – have designed a joint proposal called Stronger Somerset.

There are two bids going forward, the One Somerset case and the Stronger Somerset case.

At Full Council on 3 December, Somerset West and Taunton Council voted in favour of all four Districts to submit the full proposal to central government, with support drawn from across the political spectrum.

The Stronger Somerset plan sets an ambitious agenda for delivering a better and more efficient quality of services to its communities.

### **Development and Commercial Investment**

## **Firepool**

Further preparation work has been undertaken and the first block (no 6) has been given detailed planning approval. Parts of Block 3 are close to completion (GWR Goods Office). Various other preparatory works have been undertaken on Blocks 2 and 4. The new access from Trenchard Way has secured funding and will be starting on site shortly.

The block by block masterplan and accompanying Local Development Order has been progressed throughout the last year but has hit a phosphate blockage that has prevented submission. Various options to address Phosphates have been considered both in the short and medium term. Detailed planning applications have been progressed and will short be submitted for Blocks 1 (Firepool South by Viridor), 3 (Firepool North, opposite the station multi storey car park) and the infrastructure and engineering works required to support Blocks 2, 4 and 5. This year will see a substantial start and progress in all Blocks. Decisions about funding packages and delivery routes have also been agreed. Despite the challenges this site has and continues to present we will be in the delivery stages of the project in the coming 12 months.

## **Coal Orchard**

The Development for Coal Orchard continued through the year. Despite the impact of the pandemic on working practices and impacting the supply chain for materials, the project has remained on budget with the first show-home being marketed at Easter. This Spring/Summer will see the final stage of the programme with the completion of the site and marketing of all of the properties. Whilst there has been a short delay in delivery due to the pandemic impact, the programme remain on track for budget and income forecast. Most importantly, the regeneration of this site into a modern and vibrant place where people can live and work, in the heart of Taunton, will be complete. We have secured our first commercial tenant and with the easing of lockdown restrictions allowing a handover schedule to be agreed, we can very shortly announce this milestone tenancy. We have also successfully negotiated a grant of £880k from Homes England towards the infrastructure on this project.

**Seaward Way** 2 units on Rainbow Way and the construction of infrastructure.

This programme marks the second regeneration project completed by this Council, bringing two new industrial units to Minehead which already have businesses in occupation and people working in them. This build was commenced and completed within 12 calendar months (which allowing for furlough and slow down due to Covid19, is remarkable).

The project was delivered under budget by £180k, and met or exceeded all other targets outlined in the business case, including the exceeding the forecast return on investment.

The one major outstanding item is the installation of the waste water pumping station by Wessex Water. Unfortunately during Covid19 the effectively stopped responding to all but emergency requests, so the start date for this work is May 21. We have also successfully negotiated a grant of £960k from Homes England towards the infrastructure on this project.

## **Wellington Station**

Last year I commented that the Dept for Transport had announced that it was considering Wellington Station as a 'Restoring your Railway' scheme. Working in collaboration with Mid-Devon, a submission of a Strategic Outline Business Case has now been submitted for this scheme, which could fund up to 75% of the £15 Million of the cost of a new station at Wellington. Although the outcome of our submission at this time is unknown, the findings of the outline business case showed strong benefits could be gained in terms of social and economy benefits. This Council has made provision for resources needed for the creation of the Full Business Case and will take this project forward in 2021.

### **Active Travel**

One of the unexpected events driven by the pandemic was the closure of East Street in Taunton, which was closed to allow safe passage for pedestrians to be able to socially distance. This gave us a unique opportunity to observe how traffic could flow and what impact this closure had on pedestrians and businesses should we consider this as a longer term aspect of Taunton Town Centre. We will be considering this, and further active travel improvements during 2021, including our FHSF award of £1.5m towards Active Travel schemes.

### **Commercial Income**

Our commercial portfolio build is now well under way, with five property completions so far, remaining on track to hit our income target of £2.9 Million for 2021/2022 and onwards.

### **Climate Change**

We have developed and approved our own Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Action Plan (CNCR) which sits alongside the Somerset-wide strategy and have created a Climate Change Team which means, as a Council, we can progress the actions within the CNCR Plan.

We have also supported Somerset Waste Partnership's campaigns and initiatives to increase waste reduction, re-use and recycling including the 'Slim My Waste', 'Feed My Face' campaign.

We also monitor the Council's corporate greenhouse gas emissions and delivered actions on an annual basis.

SWT have adopted the Somerset-wide Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Strategy and have delivered a funding scheme for community charge points available to town and parish councils.

I am very pleased to say SWT are also part of the Department for Transport's e-scooter launch.

### **Housing**

We completed new council homes at Laxton Road which were immediately let and have now approved a comprehensive programme of new build council homes introducing low and zero carbon standards which will help achieve our climate change objectives and reduce fuel costs to tenants. We are progressing our commitment to more community housing with the regeneration of the North Taunton

replacing poor quality homes with larger, better accessible, warmer and low carbon homes for rent. The demolition of the first phase of the North Taunton project is complete and new homes and a new community centre will commence imminently. Throughout the District we continue to enable more homes especially affordable homes through our housing association partners and private developers. In the areas hardest to develop, such as Exmoor and many of our most rural communities we are working closely with communities promoting Community Led Housing.

Although we now have a pipeline of new council homes coming forward over the coming years we have continued to purchase properties during the year to increase the number of affordable homes for rent.

Our strategic housing work has focused on better outcomes for our most vulnerable residents. Our analysis of the housing need in the District will help the council bring forward homes directly or through partners which better meet the diverse needs of our community.

### **Homelessness Provision:**

At the start of the financial year, the government gave the Council three days' notice to bring all rough sleepers off the street to protect them from Covid-19. The response to this request, under these pressured timescales was phenomenal and the Council identified and secured accommodation at Canonsgrove Halls of Residence and the Beach Hotel and reached agreement with the YMCA Dulverton Group to manage this accommodation. Although the government's initial request was to protect this group for three months, Covid-19 is still here and they continue to urge us to accommodate all rough sleepers throughout this time.

The provision at Canonsgrove has been a great success with commitment from all partners to provide joined-up support to complex and vulnerable tenants, which has made a real difference and changed lives. The commitment of the Council, YMCADG, Mental Health Services, SCC Social Care Services, the NHS, Drug and Alcohol Services, Open Door, Salvation Army, RAFT and others has meant that many residents have been able to get the support they need, in safe accommodation and start to rebuild their lives. We know that our interventions have saved many people's lives. The model has been cited nationally and has attracted a considerable amount of national media attention. To date, we have been able to support close to 150 homeless people, many of whom we have now moved on into independent accommodation.

Alongside this, we have been successful in securing government funding to support our homelessness ambitions. This includes £1m capital and revenue funding to secure the Gascony Hotel in Minehead to allow us to move people on from the Beach Hotel. Again this has been achieved through strong partnership working with the YMCA Dulverton Group. The focus for next year will be to approve our Homeless Accommodation Strategy and identify and secure long-term accommodation and support, with partners, so that we ensure that all those supported through Covid-19 at Canonsgrove and elsewhere will have stable long-term accommodation offers in the future. We are aware of the impact to the community and this will be a key aspect of a two way rebuilding of relations moving forward.