

# Council – 6 September 2022

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

### 1 **Emergency Services Day Flag Raising**

On Friday 2 September I was pleased to attend the flag raising ceremony at Deane House, Taunton. The flag was also flown at West Somerset House and will remain for the week leading up to Emergency Services Day which is traditionally commemorated on 9 September.

### 2. **SWT declared 'Cost of Living Emergency'**

At its Full Council meeting on 5 July 2022, Somerset West and Taunton Council declared a districtwide emergency in response to rising living costs currently suffered by residents.

A motion declaring a cost of living emergency and subsequent action to address energy bills, universal credit and fuel duty was considered and passed by Councillors at that meeting.

During the meeting, the Council resolved to administer a £50,000 support fund to be ready by the end of the summer for residents most affected by food and energy price increases. Work to set up the support fund is already in progress and will be distributed by Citizens Advice.

It was also agreed that I should write to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, requesting that VAT be cut to 17.5 per cent for 12 months to alleviate inflation, which, rose to a 40-year high of 9% on 18 May. It was also agreed that I would request that both the £20 Universal Credit supplement and pensions "triple-lock" (whereby pensions rise in value, either by average earnings, inflation or 2.5 per cent a year – whichever is higher), should also be reinstated.

As the pensions "triple lock" has been suspended for 2022/23, Somerset West and Taunton's pensioners will see a below inflation increase, which for some, is their only source of income. Additionally, the much relied upon £20 Universal Credit uplift scheme ended in October last year, further impacting low income families. The motion to consider a "cost of living emergency" was proposed by SWT's Executive Member for Communities, Councillor Chris Booth.

On 1 April 2022, Ofgem increased the energy price cap by 54% and with further rises expected in October, the average energy bill will increase annually by £693 for standard tariffs and by £708 for pre-paid meters (Ofgem, 2022). What is more, over a quarter of the UK's electricity is from renewable sources which have been largely unaffected by rising energy prices, however, energy bills are led by natural gas prices.

Further financial strain has been placed on the travelling public from the escalating cost of fuel. As of 16 June, the average cost per litre was 187.01p for petrol and 193.30p for diesel, with a nationwide rise of over £2 expected by the end of the summer. Filling a 55-litre fuel tank in a typical family car now costs on average £102.86 for petrol and £106.32 for diesel, which is disproportionately affecting rural residents who, in the year to March 2020, paid on average £114 a week in transport costs – almost £40 more than those in urban areas.

To cut household bills ahead of the next energy price hike, the motion also called for swift Government action to uncouple gas from electricity prices, and that I should write to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, calling for fuel duty reductions in rural areas to be extended to include Somerset.

## 2.1 **LGR**

Vesting day gets closer with every day that passes; as you will have picked up from Somerset County Council's papers and from press coverage, the new authority faces a challenging financial start. As Somerset West and Taunton Council we are playing our part in helping the budget setting process. We want to make sure we leave a legacy we can be proud of and set the conditions for the new authority to succeed.

We have embarked on a process to regularise the irregular, to give certainty where we can to our staff. We want our people to transfer to the new authority knowing exactly where they stand, specifically the terms of service on which they will TUPE transfer to the new authority. When it comes to committed and uncommitted reserves, we have worked hard to ensure we free up as much money as we can, and we have reviewed the capital programme. In the next few weeks, we will form the 'Close Down' team who will make sure we close Somerset West and Taunton in good order.

In early October Duncan Sharkey will start as Chief Executive for Somerset County Council. As you would expect, we have reached out and invited Duncan to meet the team and get a feel for the significant volume of work that will transition from us to the new authority.