



Somerset West & Taunton Liberal Democrat Councillors Group
March 2023

That's All, Folks!

What we did during our brief existence



The defining issue of our four years in office has been the Covid crisis. This has fundamentally altered the work that we have to do and the way in which we do it. Many of our staff have been working from home, where possible, throughout both periods of lockdown and the period of relative freedom between.

Covid put new duties on us, including the distribution of almost £50m of grants to businesses. We also made the decision to undertake other, non-statutory tasks such as establishing which of our tenants are vulnerable and how we might be able to support them during the Covid crisis. We suspended car parking charges throughout lockdown, in order to assist key workers, and beyond lockdown, in order to support our struggling retail sector as it spluttered back to life.

We achieved these things with no additional government funding and within our existing staff resourcing.

The other overarching task was to fix the botched Tory "transformation" which came with the birth of Somerset West and Taunton. Many elements of the programme were fundamentally flawed and mismanaged. We commissioned an independent report into what had gone wrong from the South West Audit Partnership. Their report was damning. Pretty much whatever could have gone wrong, went wrong. Poor management, poor financial control, poor planning, no visible risk management and, crucially, no written advice at all! We had to repair the damage and rebuild the broken services.

For example, almost none of the hundreds of services that were supposed to be managed by the website were working at the point when the staff had been made redundant. Having paid out over £7m in redundancy - twice what had been budgeted for - we found ourselves having to hire staff to do those same jobs; in some cases the same people!

We have worked incredibly hard to steady the ship and managed to fix the basics - like answering the phones in a proper fashion, not the 45 min waiting times experienced when we took over.



Find

Summary Details

Decisions published

Title	Date
Financial payment for homeless accommodation at Beach Hotel and Canonsgrove	14/07/2020
Landlord Health and Safety Property Compliance Update Report	07/12/2020
SWAP Internal Audit - Progress Report 2020-21	08/12/2020
Playing Fields	08/12/2020

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We appointed a rural housing officer to assist with Exmoor housing development and rural community-led housing.

We reassessed our building programme in order to produce low- and zero-carbon developments.

We are retrofitting green infrastructure to our housing stock.

We took homeless people off the streets and provided housing and help during the pandemic.

We declared a climate emergency.

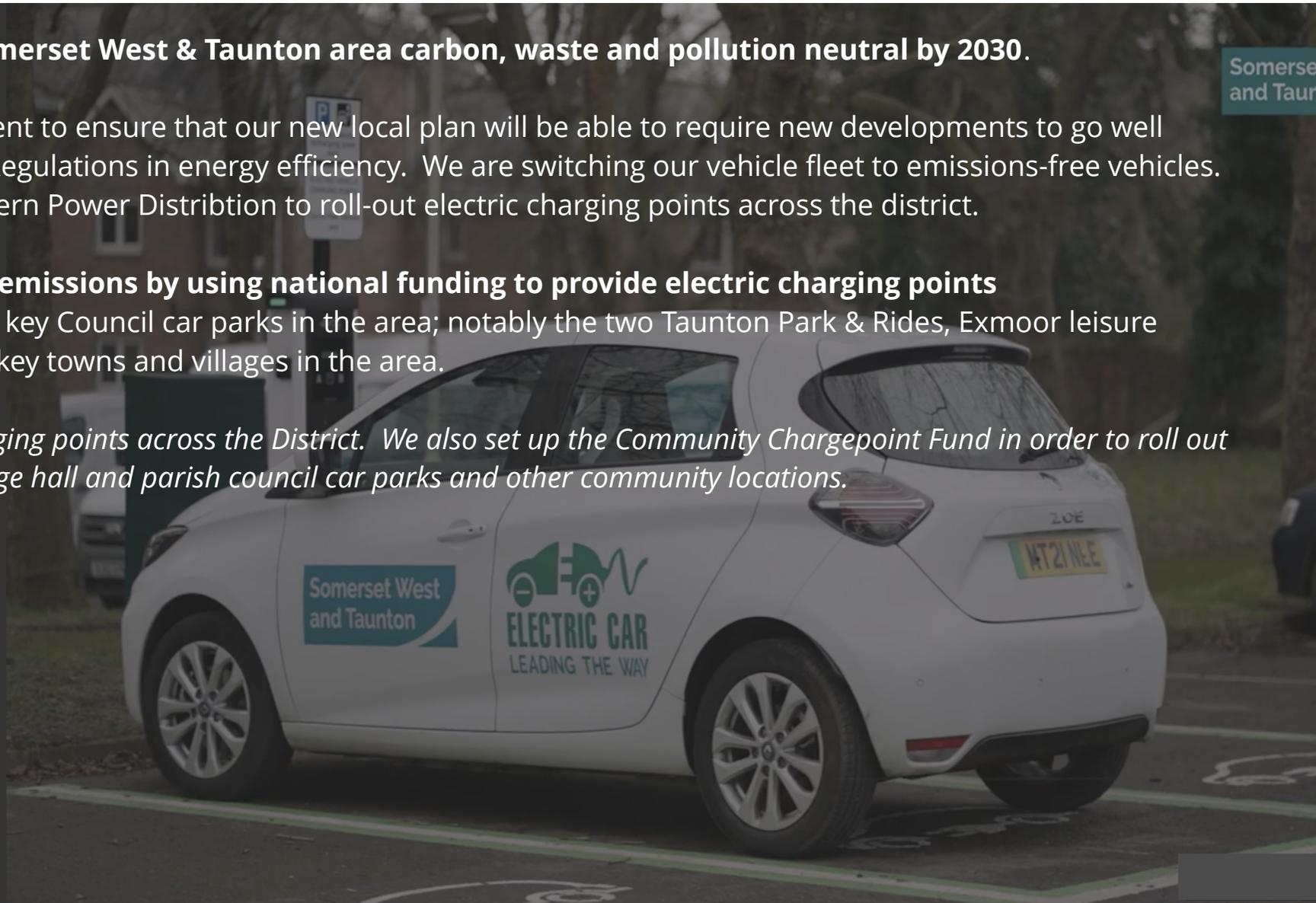
Planned to make Somerset West & Taunton area carbon, waste and pollution neutral by 2030.

We lobbied Government to ensure that our new local plan will be able to require new developments to go well beyond the Building Regulations in energy efficiency. We are switching our vehicle fleet to emissions-free vehicles. We worked with Western Power Distribution to roll-out electric charging points across the district.

Limited car and bus emissions by using national funding to provide electric charging points

for bus and car use in key Council car parks in the area; notably the two Taunton Park & Rides, Exmoor leisure spots, Minehead and key towns and villages in the area.

We have installed charging points across the District. We also set up the Community Chargepoint Fund in order to roll out charging points to village hall and parish council car parks and other community locations.



We established a scheme to ensure that replacement council vehicles were procured as zero emission vehicles, and one to help staff switch to zero emissions vehicles.

Supported the bid for cycle route funding from Taunton Area Cycling Campaign's proposal. We largely adopted the TACC plan for cycling in Taunton as part of the Taunton Transport Strategy, and investigated all opportunities to fund this work.



Continued financial support (£230k) to the county council for the continuation of **park and ride services**.

Worked to pioneer a 'Liberteen' **bus pass for the district's 16-18 year olds** in Further Education (or top-ups for those on bursaries) for the same price as a railcard.

We have secured the **Taunton Bus Station** site for future use as a bus station.

Connected Nexus to the Park & Ride site.



We worked with SCC to transform the Park & Ride sites, with additional facilities, including cafes, toilets, electric charging points, including for buses, and, in the case of the Gateway Park & Ride, a long-distance coach stop.



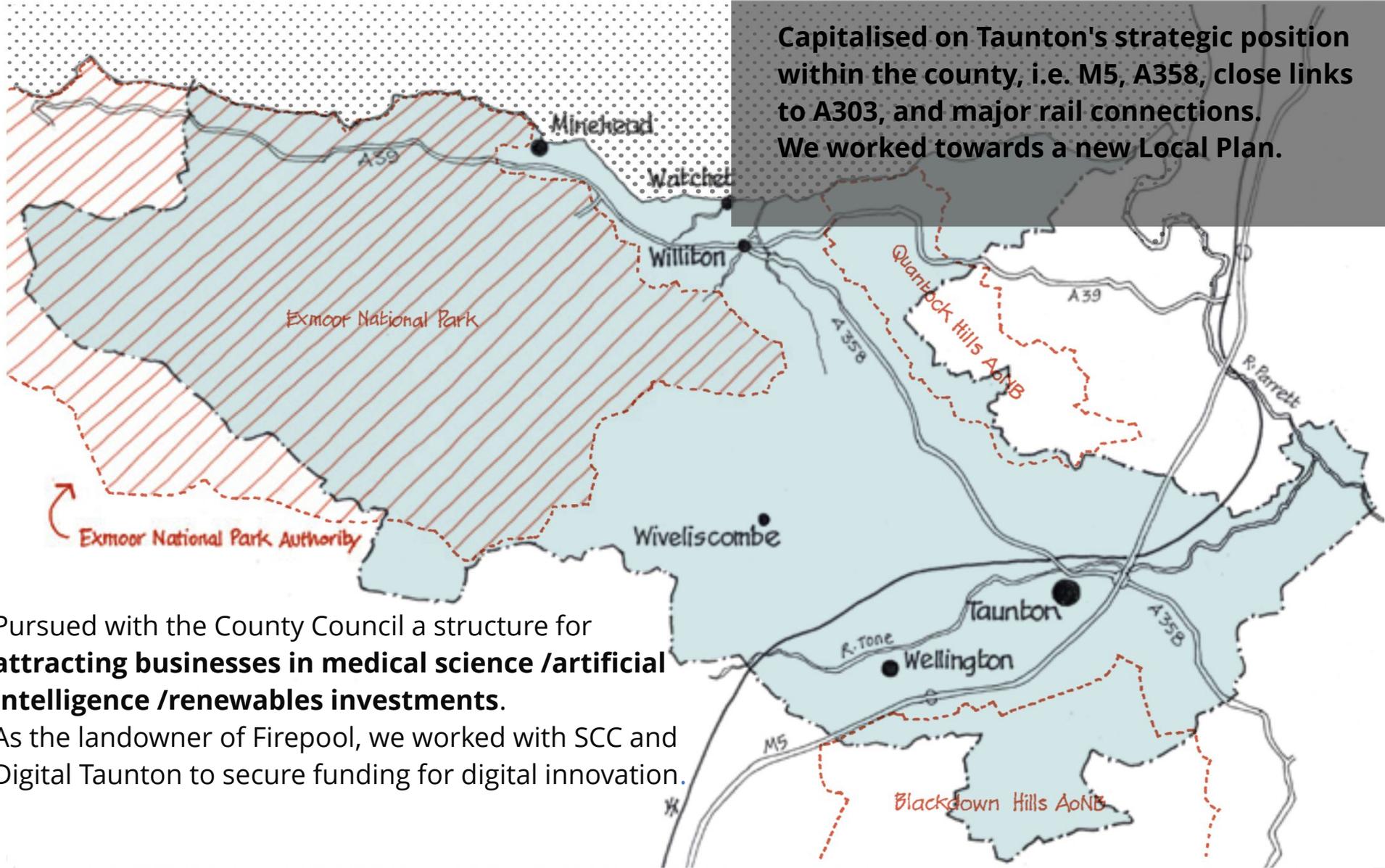
Tonedale Mill, Wellington - following further degradation of this important heritage asset, SWT intervened, carried out repairs and billed the owner.

We delivered **affordable employment space** and support for small start-up 'green' businesses, especially in the High Street, Firepool, and rural areas.

Along with £500,000 investment in our High Streets, we **supported business** during the pandemic with free parking for four months – unique in Somerset.

We piloted the Local Development Order for small employment space across the entire district.

Capitalised on Taunton's strategic position within the county, i.e. M5, A358, close links to A303, and major rail connections. We worked towards a new Local Plan.



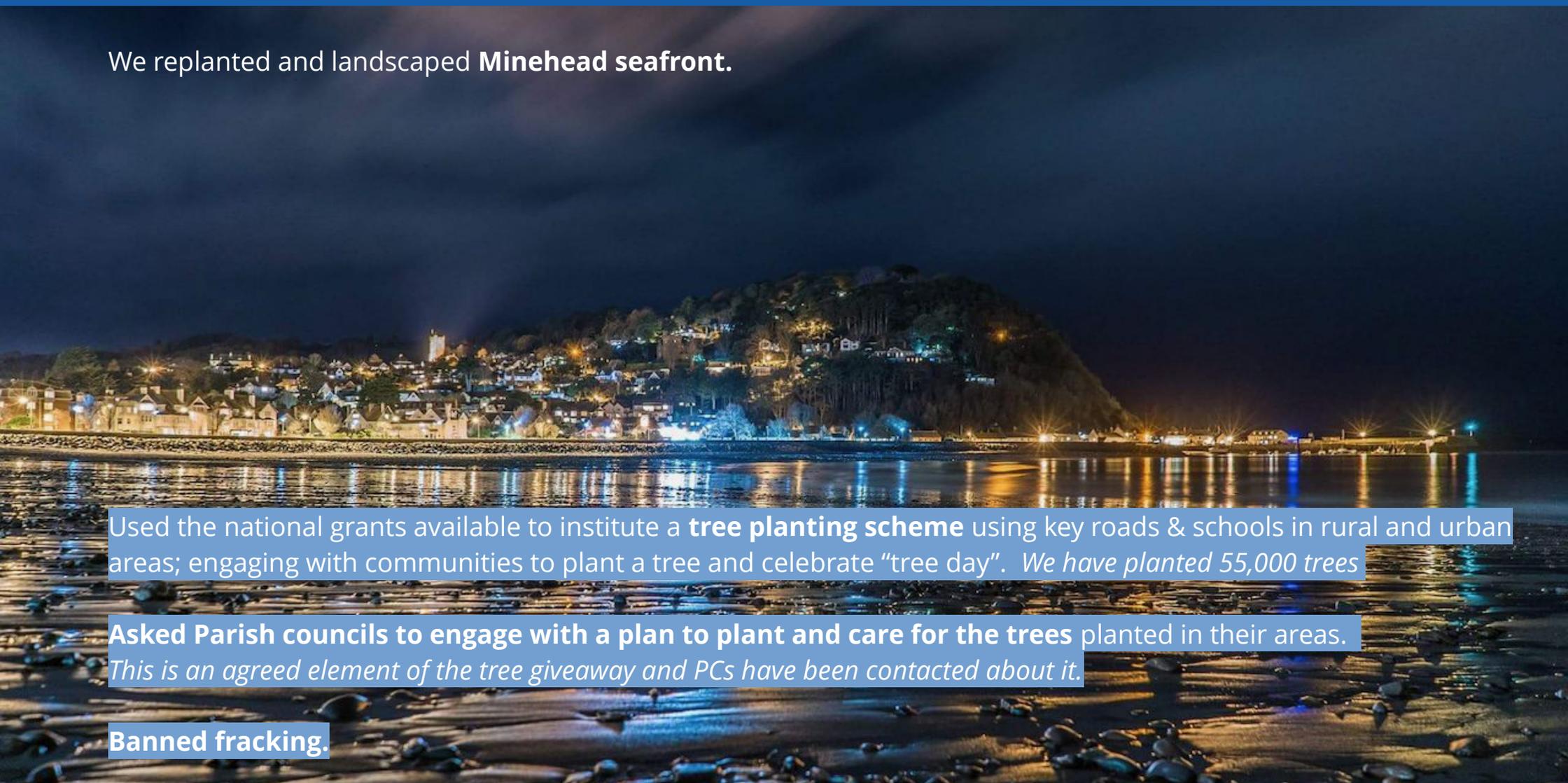
Pursued with the County Council a structure for **attracting businesses in medical science /artificial intelligence /renewables investments.**

As the landowner of Firepool, we worked with SCC and Digital Taunton to secure funding for digital innovation.

Encouraged communities at risk of flooding to **develop flood plans**. We supported emergency response networks and services.

We supported the campaign for a **swimming pool in Minehead** and implementation of business plans to develop the town. *We worked with Minehead Business Improvement District (BID) team to improve the town, and planned a feasibility study for swimming facilities.*

We replanted and landscaped **Minehead seafront**.

A nighttime photograph of Minehead, showing the town built on a hillside overlooking the sea. The lights of the buildings and streetlights are reflected in the water. The foreground shows a rocky beach.

Used the national grants available to institute a **tree planting scheme** using key roads & schools in rural and urban areas; engaging with communities to plant a tree and celebrate "tree day". *We have planted 55,000 trees*

Asked Parish councils to engage with a plan to plant and care for the trees planted in their areas. *This is an agreed element of the tree giveaway and PCs have been contacted about it.*

Banned fracking.



We are reopening the **Blenheim Gardens Café** in Minehead.

We made Taunton a real 'Garden Town' with tough new targets to generate renewable energy and zero-carbon homes standards.

Refreshed and revitalised the town by having a traffic free zone for delivery vehicles, zero-carbon buses and taxis only, according to a strategic plan. Within weeks of taking office, we had pedestrianised St James Street. We have worked closely with traders to overcome initial fears and concerns and assisted them in rebranding themselves at the Independent Quarter.

East Street was temporarily pedestrianised. An immense amount of work went into making this work in a short timescale, ensuring that buses, taxis and deliveries could also still operate successfully.





We set out to boost arts and culture provision within the District. For every £1 we spent on Arts and Culture, £5.41 was generated in the local economy. Plus events supported and hosted by SWT brought in over 182,131 people to the local area.

We invested in young people's creativity, supporting the TYCA festival, Stacked Wonky, new arts classes and projects raising awareness of careers in arts and museums. We enabled 9,395 children to get involved in arts and culture activities in a twelve month period with 78 school projects being undertaken.

We provided vital grants to arts groups across the district like The Regal Theatre Minehead, Take Art, Taunton Brewhouse, Bluebirds Theatre, Go Create Taunton, CICCIC and many more. We supported amazing festivals in Taunton (Sound of the Streets, Pride), Porlock (Porlock Arts Trail and the next Porlock Bay Festival), and Wellington (Welly Film Festival).

We brought the Moon (by Luke Jerram) to Taunton Minster and booked in the Earth, Gaia, as a parting gift (Catch it at the Minster in April).

We supported the creation of a new Arts Hub in Taunton with artists' studios, community workshops and wellbeing provision.

We partnered Titan Arcadia in establishing a super cool 'pop up' gallery in Coal Orchard .

We commissioned an iconic artwork for Taunton High Street – the **Somerset Dragon** - and kick started a 'public art' renaissance.





We started work on the Firepool development

Garden Boulevard including quality restaurants/businesses.

Multi-Purpose Venue

We continued to support the Brewhouse Theatre in financial and material terms and examined the provision of theatre space as part of the Firepool development through the MPV feasibility study.

Links from Firepool to the Coal Orchard with quality high-density housing. We have delivered the Coal Orchard development of quality density housing at both that site and Firepool.



We built **Coal Orchard**.

We provided **Green infrastructure** as part of housing developments and through zero-carbon homes.

We ensured residents have safe and secure housing

Currently the Woolaway properties in North Taunton are being replaced in a major building programme. All forms of current carbon-reducing methods are explored in new build developments. We are currently proposing to build 50 zero-carbon homes.

Defended existing Council Housing, and built more

We had a strong council house building programme, reviewed the 30 year plan to build 1000 new homes and looked to build homes for social rent in the west of the district.

We provided multi-agency **support to the most vulnerable people** on taking up CH tenancies, to assist those in turning their lives around. Working with the SCC Village Agents scheme, we ensured sheltered housing wardens were retained where needed.

Multi-agency support was provided for tenants as well as other residents. Our housing team provided support to sustain tenancies including information on benefits available. Our rent arrears system ensured that tenants do not build up excessive rent arrears causing unnecessary debt. During the the Covid emergency, we had a system to ensure that vulnerable tenants were contacted and helped where necessary. We were also at the centre of a multi-agency effort to house homeless people during the spring 2020 lockdown and many positive outcomes have transpired from the concentrated support that the project provided.



We contributed funding and resources to LiveWest's development of 42 family homes in Wellington, in support of our plan to provide much needed affordable housing, as visited here by our Exec Member for Housing, Cllr Fran Smith



*We continued to press for the **maximum possible proportion of affordable housing** within new developments and have achieved some developments with greater than 25% affordable housing.*

The Covid Emergency gave us an opportunity to completely transform our approach to street homelessness and rough sleeping. Our project to house and help Taunton's street homeless garnered national press attention and we were determined to maintain that service beyond the period of emergency Government funding. We bid for government funding to support housing in Minehead, revenue funding for Canonsgrove and other agencies supporting homelessness in our area.

We led the work to find a solution to the **phosphates** issue that delayed development in the Tone catchment area.



Zero tolerance of crime and anti-social behaviour, a plan to work with partners to make SWT towns safer: mental health organisations, police & other community groups.

We supported the Streetwise team to manage rough sleeping.

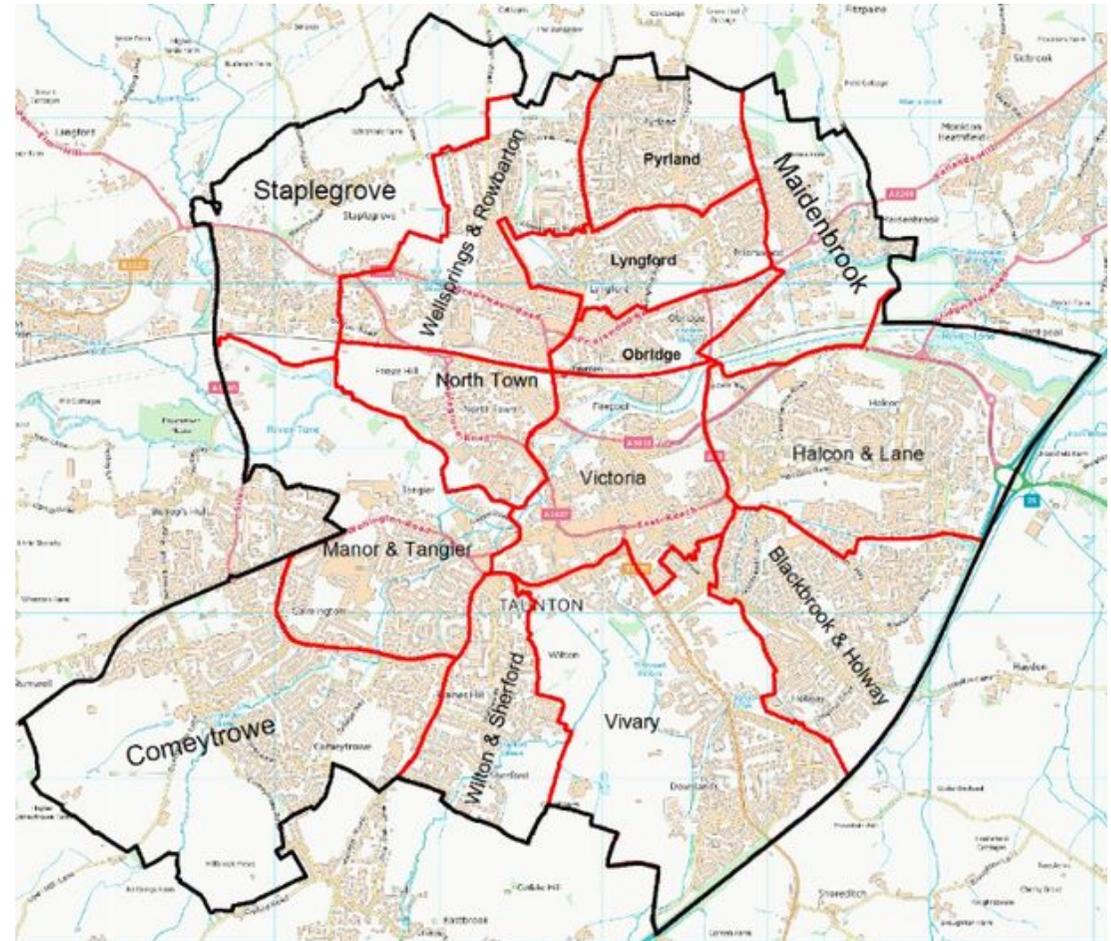
Adopted council tax support scheme including greater help for care leavers.



We provided for family leisure activities within the parks and new town centre developments. We worked with our leisure service provider to bring excellent services to residents.

We created a **Town Council in Taunton** to act as a separate and distinct voice for Taunton within the county.

We allowed for **greater public participation in council meetings** (e.g. live-stream meetings) and devolve some planning decisions to be taken by professional officers at Parish/Town Council meetings. Live-streaming of council meetings is now widespread.



We ran a “Slim my Waste” campaign to limit landfill costs, using school and community groups to deliver the message.

Somerset Waste Partnership used schools to promote the message and even used bin designs from pupils.

Pushed for maximum kerbside recycling as soon as possible.

We worked with Somerset Waste Partnership on this and the programme has rolled out across the District.

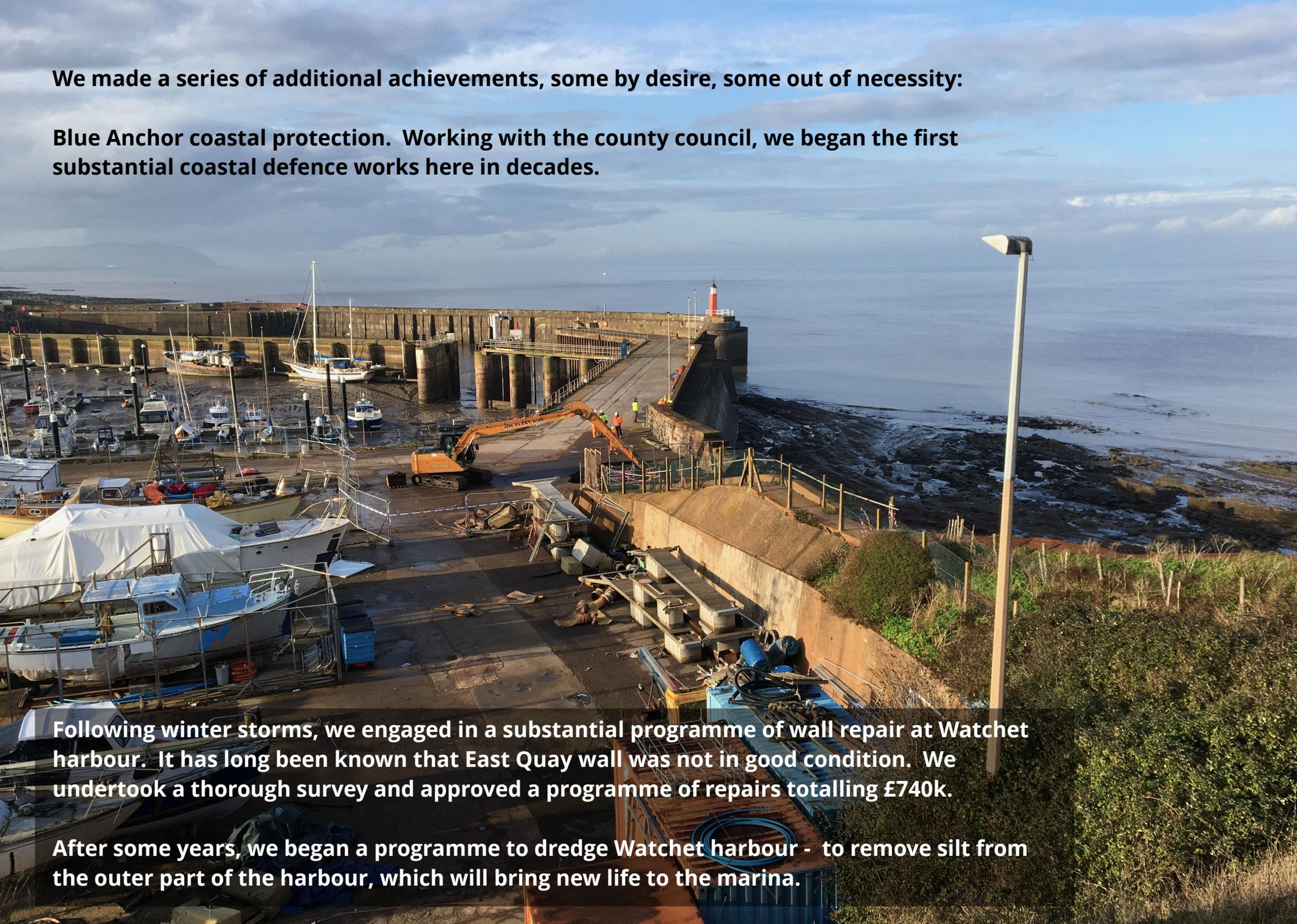


We made a series of additional achievements, some by desire, some out of necessity:

Blue Anchor coastal protection. Working with the county council, we began the first substantial coastal defence works here in decades.

Following winter storms, we engaged in a substantial programme of wall repair at Watchet harbour. It has long been known that East Quay wall was not in good condition. We undertook a thorough survey and approved a programme of repairs totalling £740k.

After some years, we began a programme to dredge Watchet harbour - to remove silt from the outer part of the harbour, which will bring new life to the marina.



Helping to pay for all we do – Cardiff Audi, one of the buildings in our **Commercial Property Investment** programme. SWT was a cautious but successful player in this area, and the money raised was enough to fund 75 staff in the 2022-23 financial year.

It is often said that ‘the greatest fortunes are made in times of crisis’ and this crisis is no exception. But the council did not speculate on property values – rather, it sought to make a **reliable return from rental** income, to provide a secure future for SWT residents even as Government cut central funding to the bone.





We introduced **e-scooters** in Taunton and Minehead, and worked hard to address teething problems and perceived issues.

We worked closely with Taunton traders, helping them devise and promote the Taunton Independent Quarter branding.



We worked with partners to deliver the much-needed repairs to **Wellington Monument**
– the world’s largest triangular obelisk



In Minehead, we started building the first **new council houses in West Somerset** for many years.



NEW DEVELOPMENT
AT RAINBOW WAY

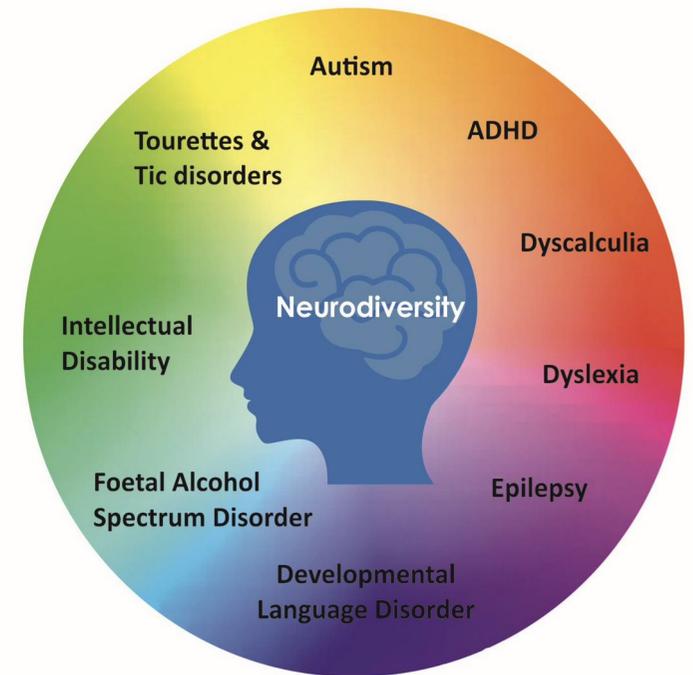
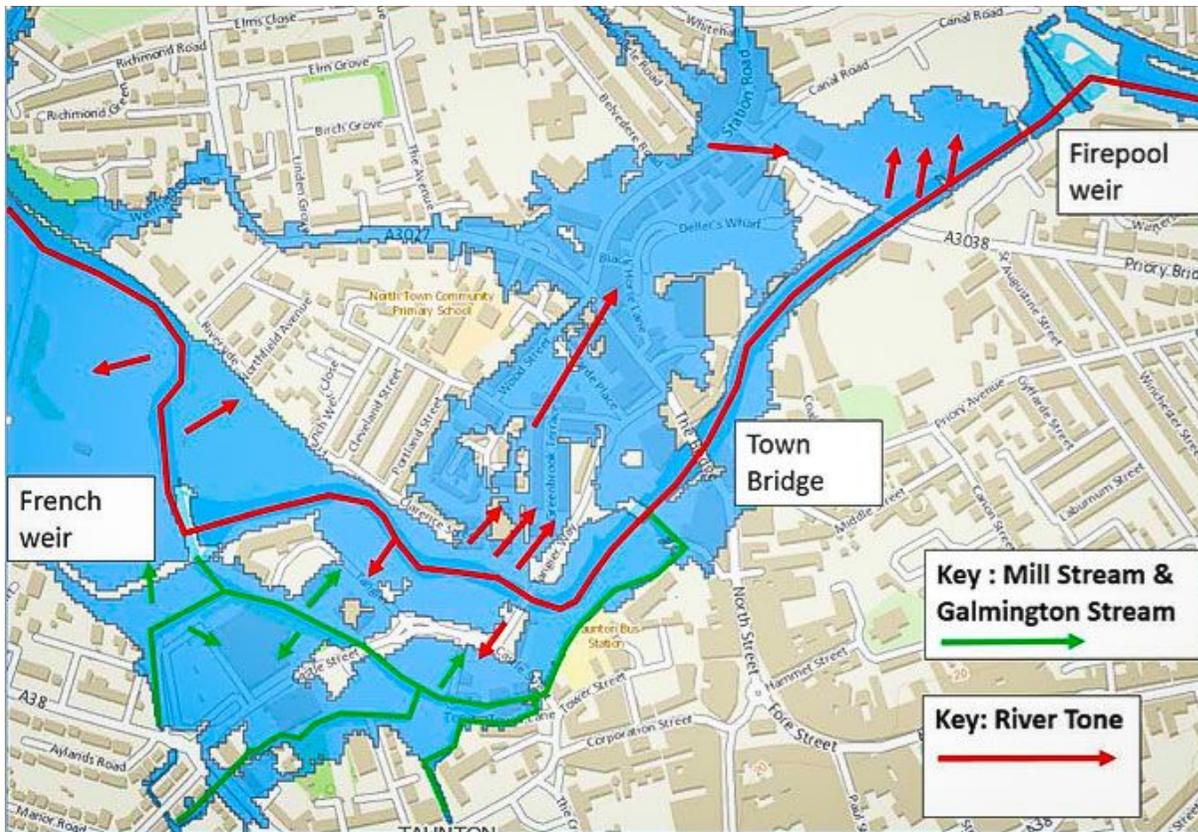
Somerset West
and Taunton

Classic Builders

CONSTRUCTION OF 54 NEW ZERO
CARBON-COUNCIL AFFORDABLE
HOMES

We approved a £6m **flood alleviation** spend for Taunton.

We contributed £1.5m to motorway **junction 25** improvements.



We established a **neurodiversity policy** for staff. One in seven people are neurodivergent, meaning that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently.



We approved a 30-year housing plan, including the construction of 1,000 new homes.

Councillors Dawn Johnson and Sarah Wakefield at the Orchard Grove (Comeytrove Urban Extension) site, Taunton, to look the new school site and progress on the spine road and drainage issues



We approved a corporate equalities plan.

We signed the Armed Forces Covenant.

We continued financial support for the Citizens Advice Bureaux.

We remember our
councillors who
died in office.

We thank all who served.



Jean Adkins



Alan Wedderkopp



Anthony Trollope-Bellew

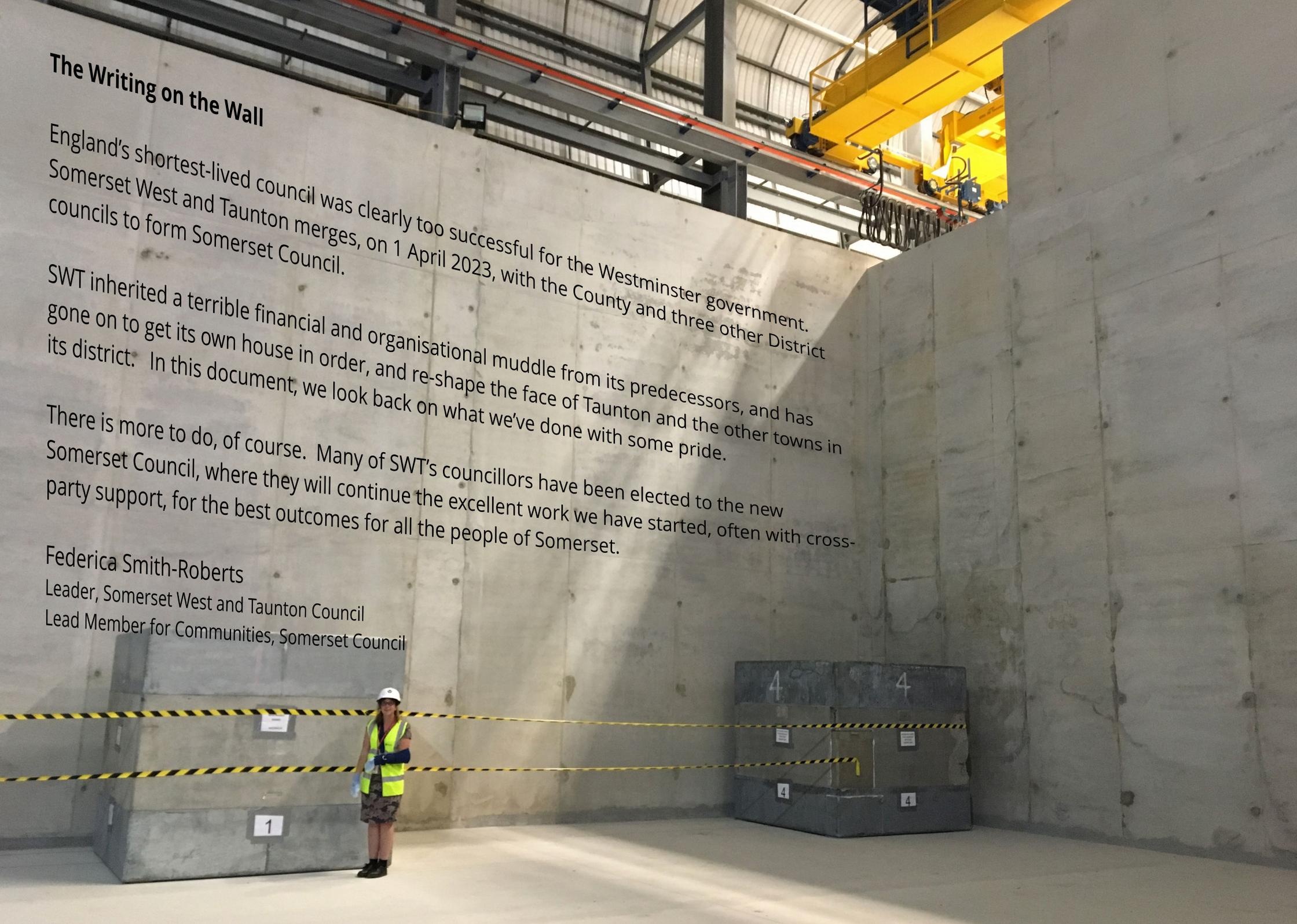
The Writing on the Wall

England's shortest-lived council was clearly too successful for the Westminster government. Somerset West and Taunton merges, on 1 April 2023, with the County and three other District councils to form Somerset Council.

SWT inherited a terrible financial and organisational muddle from its predecessors, and has gone on to get its own house in order, and re-shape the face of Taunton and the other towns in its district. In this document, we look back on what we've done with some pride.

There is more to do, of course. Many of SWT's councillors have been elected to the new Somerset Council, where they will continue the excellent work we have started, often with cross-party support, for the best outcomes for all the people of Somerset.

Federica Smith-Roberts
Leader, Somerset West and Taunton Council
Lead Member for Communities, Somerset Council



Text by SWT Executive members

Diagrams and drawings by Somerset West and Taunton Council

Photography by Benet Allen and Somerset West and Taunton Council, except as noted:

Somerset Dragon and Moon at the Minster – Caroline Ellis

Minehead Bay by night - Paul Waby

Tonedale Mill – user Webbs0710 at 28dayslater.co.uk

Armed Forces day – Clayton Jane Photography for SWT

Wellington Monument - © National Trust Images/John Miller

'Minehead Villa' from the SWT Planning Design Guide

Layout by Benet Allen

Carbon-neutral printing by Helloprint

This document is available online at shorturl.at/pFIT4



Fig. 3:
Minehead villas

