

Agenda item 3

For decision: Endorse the report on Local Government Reorganisation and promote it to stakeholders

Author: Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

Summary

This report recommends that FTC endorses and promotes to stakeholders an approach to local government reorganisation as described in a report at [Appendix 1](#). Mel Usher, the author of the report, will present it to Cllrs.

The report recommends that FTC endorses the report at [Appendix 1](#).

Introduction

If it goes ahead, local government reorganisation (LGR) in Somerset, will have a massive impact on the way public services are delivered for years to come. There is an opportunity to influence this process now and thereby help to shape these services. The report at [Appendix 1](#) says that whatever form LGR takes, the role of the parish sector and local communities should be embedded into new structures.

Background

Frome Town Council has played an active role in the unitary debate in Somerset over the past 18 months. We were asked by De Montfort University to contribute to their research commissioned by the five principal authorities in Somerset in early 2019. As the debate progressed and alongside the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC), Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and Glastonbury Town Council, in early 2020, we commissioned Mel Usher to explore lessons learnt from other unitary projects from the perspective of parish councils and to recommend a future role that they could play in meeting the needs of the community.

Discussion

Mel Usher held detailed conversations with those involved in unitary debates around the south west and led a conference at Frome Town Hall to build a set of recommendations on LGR in Somerset from the parish perspective. The report is the product of these discussions.

To be clear, the report does not favour any particular type of unitary arrangement. Instead, it makes seven recommendations that any new arrangement in Somerset should adopt. These would apply to a unitary based on the current county boundary, a unitary based on one or more current district boundaries or a model with deeper collaboration at its heart.

The underlying thesis of the report is that LGR provides a once in a generation opportunity to rethink local government service provision in Somerset. It says *"any real gains from LGR will come from rethinking how multiple community issues are addressed in the future. If the same services and functions end up being managed in the same way with the same outcomes then a real opportunity will be missed. And that's where parishes can help (para 5.2)"*.

Built on the Frome model, the report shows how parish councils could contribute to the solution and proposes a structure to enable that to happen.

The LGR process

There are three stages in moving from the current arrangement in Somerset. First, principal councils will submit a business case for re-organising local government to the Secretary of State. The County is currently drafting a Business Plan proposing one new unitary based on the current county boundary. They aim to submit that to Government at the end of July. The County has seen the report and, I understand, intend to incorporate the seven recommendations into their Business Plan.

At the time of writing I am unsure the route and timetable that the District Councils will take although I understand that District Leaders have had sight of an early draft of the report.

Second, the Secretary of State will then "be minded" to approve one or none of the Business Plans submitted. Once one has been chosen, a more detailed transition plan will be drafted. This will be a large and expensive process and probably involve many heated discussions between the county and districts and, we expect, the parish sector.

If the preferred plan meets with Ministerial approval for a second time, the third stage will start with a transitional period and end with unitary council elections. The County's timetable indicates that these would be held in April 2022.

Next steps for FTC if Cllrs endorse the report at [Appendix 1](#)

The next step would be to build a base of support across the county and promote the findings to decision makers (possibly including those at national level), other parishes and stakeholders.

The report would be sent, formally, to the Leaders and CEOs of the County Council and Mendip District Council endorsing the recommendations, proposing that they are incorporated into any Business Plan and requesting to meet them to discuss it. I hope that MDC are willing to discuss this report with us. We have already had a series of meetings with the Leader of the County.

It is important to discuss the recommendations with our neighbouring parishes too, especially the proposals on local networks.

Lastly, with the help of SALC and SLCC, we will be part of any county wide discussions with the Districts Leaders, the Clinical Commissioning Group, the emergency services, and others to build support.

Recommendations

1. Endorse the report at [Appendix 1](#)
2. Delegate to the Town Clerk with the Leader, deputy Leader and Cllr Ackroyd to take the next steps as described in the report above.