

## Agenda item 5

### For information - Update on the unitary process in Somerset

Author: Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

#### Summary

This report brings Cllrs up to date on the unitary debate. It confirms that Government has decided that there will be a unitary council in Somerset, provides a likely timetable for the process and explains FTC's role in the debate in the months ahead.

#### Introduction

Since the last update to council on the unitary arrangements for Somerset in June, the Government has formally confirmed that there will be a unitary arrangement in Somerset and has asked for formal business case proposals from the principal councils.

#### Timetable

It is likely that the timetable will be as follows. This timetable is not certain and may change but this is the best guess at the moment.

Now – 9 Dec 2020	Somerset councils continue to refine their business cases and then submit them to Govt on 9 Dec
Feb-March 2021	Govt consults on the business cases
May 2021	County elections deferred until Unitary elections April 2022
June/July 2021	Govt decides on unitary arrangements
1 April 2022	Unitary elections. An “implementation authority” will be established comprising new Leaders from the county and four district councils (this bit is vague at the moment)
1 April 2023	Implementation date

(Just to note that our Parish Council elections are due to take place in May 2023. I see no reason why this would change.)

#### Competing unitary cases

It is likely that there will still be two competing business cases:

1. Click <https://onesomerset.org.uk/> Somerset County Council's business plan based on the current county border.

I understand that the County Council's business plan is in near final draft format and is going through the relevant approvals prior to being sent to Government this month.

2. Click <http://www.strongersomerset.co.uk/case-for-change> for the business plan from the four district councils in Somerset which proposes two unitaries: East and West Somerset. In the east it is proposed to merge Mendip and South Somerset.

The districts' proposed business plan is being consulted on at the time of writing and will then go through to the relevant approvals and will also be sent to Government this month. Kate Hellard is part of a *Stronger Somerset* group exploring how children and family support might develop.

### What we've achieved so far

Our policy, approved by Council in June, is that an active role of the parish sector and local communities should be embedded into new unitary structures. In order to achieve this, seven recommendations need to be incorporated into both the County Council's business case and the business case covering all four district councils.

The seven recommendations are:

1. A Charter for Somerset
2. Local Ownership and devolution
3. Localism and Solutions
4. Local Governance
5. Local Presence
6. Trust and Partnership
7. Parishes Working Together

June's report (with appendices) to Council explaining these recommendation in more detail is on our [website past meetings page](#).

This campaign has been successful, and it is the first time a parish based view has been incorporated into a unitary business case anywhere in the country.

### Boundary

At this stage, we've focussed our efforts on the above and not taken a position over what boundary proposal we'd prefer – i.e. the unitary will comprise either the whole of Somerset or Mendip and South Somerset districts. This is primarily because we are working closely with both teams at the moment and we don't want to sour relations with one of them. I suggest we retain this position for the time being.

### What we've done

We've met with our neighbouring parishes, the majority of whom are keen to work with us and accept that it makes sense to have more decision making made locally and for more services to be provided locally. We plan to keep in touch with our neighbouring parishes and will meet again soon when we know, for sure, the content of the two business plans.

We've met with Ros Wyke, Leader of Mendip, who has asked us to flesh out how our seven recommendations would work. We've heard the same from the unitary staff lead at County,

Carlton Brand. And, in my role as a clerk and alongside other clerks from Somerset, the leaders of two western districts and the CEO of South Somerset asked for the same. I'm calling this "fleshing out" document, the second report for now.

### Next steps

Initially, I felt it was important to have the second report completed in time for recommendations to be incorporated in the revised business plans to be submitted by 9 December. This is less important now as the Government has confirmed that the unitary planning process is a year longer than I expected.

Even so, this second report still needs to be done. In a similar way as SALC and SLCC were the main funders of the initial report that resulted in the seven recommendations, I have approached SLCC (at the national level) asking if it would fund this second report. I believe that this report will prove valuable to thousands of parishes and many principal councils across the country as more counties turn unitary. SLCC has agreed to this and I am working with them to draft the brief and to secure a consultant to do this. It won't be our report, but I will be involved in managing the project as part of the SLCC.

I expect to be able to bring back to Council this second report (hopefully) for approval in January in time to influence the Government led consultation in Feb/March 2021. This consultation exercise is to ensure in the Government's mind that the business cases have the support of the community.

Thereafter, in June/July once the Government has decided on what business case to adopt, the detailed work preparing for the unitary will begin. Again, we should take the opportunity to engage with the group of current district and county representatives to ensure the unitary is planned and built in ways that ensure the local community and parish councils have the opportunity to influence local decision making. The second report will help us to explain to them how this should happen.

### Local Community Networks

If the new unitary goes ahead as expected, it seems likely that FTC will have an opportunity to contribute to some form of unitary led, local community network. These networks would operate across the unitary and our network would probably be based on Frome. I see that ensuring these networks are established, well-resourced and include, as an equal partner, parish councils is our main challenge.

### Due diligence

In parallel to all of the above, I'm also exploring what assets and liabilities Mendip and County have and working out how they are run, how much they bring in or cost to run etc in the context of whether FTC might be interested in taking them on. This has taken a back seat so far as the priority has been to influence the business plans.

### One word of caution....

It was pointed out to me recently that even if we succeeded in achieving all of the above during these planning stages of a new unitary, the real decisions will be taken by the new unitary Cllrs, who will be elected in April 2022 in advance of the new unitary starting to function a year later. We will need to keep the pressure on then more than ever.