

Agenda item 6

For decision – Response to the Government’s consultation on the proposals to establish a unitary council in Somerset

Author: Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

Summary

This report is in three parts:

1. For decision: Approve the response to Government consultation on unitary proposals in Somerset
2. For ratification: Recruitment of adviser on developing our role in the new unitary council in Somerset
3. For information: Update on Cllr discussions with other Town Councils who have worked with new unitary councils.

1. For decision: Approve the response to Government consultation on unitary proposals in Somerset

Council had updates on unitary developments last year in June [here](#) and then in November [here](#). This third update brings Cllrs up to speed with developments.

It now seems certain that the Secretary of State will decide to establish a unitary council and will be choosing between two proposals:

- i. The County Council is proposing to establish a unitary based on the current County boundary. Click [here](#) to read their proposals in detail.
- ii. The four district Councils in Somerset have joined forces and are proposing to establish two unitary councils – East Somerset and West Somerset. Click [here](#) to read their proposal in detail. Frome would be in the East Somerset unitary council which effectively merges the current Mendip District and the South Somerset District councils.

Expected timetable

Now – end April	Gov’t consults on two proposals
July 2021	Secretary of State decides which proposal to support
Autumn (probably)	Shadow authority starts to be established
April 2022 (probably)	Unitary elections
April 2023	Unitary Council established – vesting day

Response to the Government consultation

Government is currently consulting on the two proposals.

It is important to try to influence the Government's thinking as they consider the two proposals and it is proposed to submit the response at [Appendix 2](#). As Cllrs will see, the response doesn't choose one proposal over the other. It draws heavily on the report that Mel Usher wrote for us last year [here](#) that was endorsed in June and the informal discussion that Cllrs recently had with Mel Usher and Max Wide.

The consultation focuses a lot on the proposed boundaries of the unitary and whether either of the proposals are based on a "credible geography." Our response proposes that a credible geography this is less important than how the unitary plans to interact and work with parish councils and the local community. It maintains that decision making should be made at the lowest possible level regardless of the unitary boundary. There are bound to be achievable economies of scale that the One Somerset draws on heavily and the Stronger Somerset proposal deals with via the establishment of an overarching structure.

2. For ratification: Recruitment of adviser on developing our role in the new unitary council in Somerset

Ultimately, unitary decisions will be made by the newly elected unitary Cllrs. However, in the meantime, a shadow unitary authority (SUA) will be in place by the autumn of 2021. The SUA will be tasked with creating the new unitary by vesting day. The SUA is likely to be led by a smallish group of Cllrs comprising largely of the "winning" council(s) and supported by a smallish group of senior staff.

It is important that we try to influence how and what the SUA focuses on in the early days. This work will be time consuming and detailed and in informal discussions Cllrs have indicated that an experienced advisor should be recruited to take this work forward. The brief that Cllrs have seen is attached at [Appendix 3](#). This recruitment process has already started and has been delegated to the Town Clerk, in consultation with Cllr Crawley, to complete and manage. This report therefore proposes that Cllrs ratify this decision and note that the budget used to pay for it will be the New Projects budget agreed by Cllrs at the budget setting Council meeting in January.

3. For information: Update on Cllr discussions with other Town Councils who have worked with new unitary councils.

The research that Mel Usher undertook in his report and informal discussion that I have had tended to focus on other Town Clerks around the country. While this was valuable and, indeed, proved pivotal in building our unitary policy, there has been little discussion between FTC Cllrs and other Cllrs with unitary experience elsewhere in the country. This is an important perspective to gather and Cllrs Crawley, Ackroyd, Gore and Collett will be contacting Cllrs in Chippenham, Shrewsbury, Trowbridge and Falmouth town councils to understand what went well and less well from their perspective. As these discussions develop, they will feed into the work of the adviser as well as our general thinking as the unitary projects develops over time.

Recommendations

1. Approve the response to the Government Consultation over the proposals for a unitary council(s) in Somerset at [Appendix 2](#)
2. Ratify the decision made by the Town Clerk following informal discussion with Cllrs to recruit an advisor to advise Frome Town Council in the run up to and establishment of unitary council(s) in Somerset. The brief is at [Appendix 3](#). The new project budget line is to be used to fund this work.
3. Delegate to the Town Clerk, in consultation with Cllr Crawley, the recruitment of the advisor and to manage the contract in the coming months.
4. Note that Cllrs are researching the views of Cllrs elsewhere in the country who have experience of working with unitary councils.
5. Provide updates to future Council meetings.