

Agenda item 5

For decision – Unitary Somerset update and to decide whether to work with the other Mendip towns over devolutions of some assets and liabilities

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Summary

This report provides an update on the latest developments in the unitary Somerset project. Specifically, it recommends that Council decides whether or not to support bringing forward the Town Council elections to May 2022 to be in line with the upcoming unitary elections. It also recommends that FTC works with the other Mendip towns to explore whether it is possible for Mendip to transfer some assets and liabilities to the towns prior to the establishment of the unitary.

Council had updates on unitary developments last year in June can be [viewed on the website here](#), the November update can be [viewed on the website here](#) and the March update of this year can be [viewed on the website here](#). This fourth update brings Cllrs up to speed with developments.

On 21 July 2021, the Secretary of State decided to replace the current district and county council arrangement in Somerset with a single unitary Council by April 2023. There are unitary teams comprising Cllrs and staff from all five councils being developed and FTC continues to be engaged in discussions. Things are moving fast.

Expected timetable

Now until May 2022	Plans for merging the councils, setting in place new structures, preparing for the election in May
May 2022	Unitary Council elections and shadow unitary authority established
April 2023	Unitary Council established – vesting day

Unitary and Parish Elections

It is likely that the first unitary administration will be five years, followed by a three year cycle and then, thereafter, back to the normal four cycle. There is a discussion going on about whether or not the Somerset parish council elections timetable should be brought forward a year to coincide with the unitary elections. If it does, the next Town Council administration from May 2022 will also be five years followed a three cycle and then back to four years.

SALC, on behalf of the unitary team, is consulting its members on the parish elections and I understand that the Government is likely to accept the majority view and legislate accordingly. It is highly unlikely that any individual parish council will be able to go against the majority view and be able to choose unilaterally what to do. There are pros and cons to bringing forward the parish elections. On the con side, perhaps the most significant is the current administration will not have had the usual four years to deliver on its strategy. On the pro side the cost of running the election on our own will probably be in the region of £30k, as opposed

to £15k if we share the election cost with the unitary. If the parishes didn't synchronise with the unitary election cycle, I assume that the cost of the following election in 2027 would again be in the region £30k and then drop down to £15k in 2030.

At the time of writing and informally, the overwhelming majority of responses to SALC have been in favour of bringing forward the parish elections to May 2022.

Recommendation 1 – To decide whether to respond in favour of bring forward the next FTC election to May 2022 or to respond in favour of retaining the four year cycle.

Devolution

At Council in March, it was agreed to recruit an advisor to support our work on the unitary project. A team of two advisors have been recruited and Cllrs have had a series of meetings with them to explore the devolution of assets, liabilities and services and other unitary related topics. Now that the decision to establish a unitary has been made we expect that our advisors will be able to progress discussions with district and county asset managers to carry out a due diligence exercise. Cllr Crawley and I have also met with the other Mendip towns to explore if there is an opportunity to work collectively with Mendip to transfer some assets and liabilities prior to the shadow unitary Council being established. We will return to Council for approval before any detailed discussions commence. Any decision will be informed by the due diligence exercise referred to above.

Recommendation 2

Continue with the due diligence exercise around assets and liabilities and work with the other Mendip towns and Mendip DC to explore whether some Mendip assets and liabilities (to be determined by Council) could be transferred before the dissolution of Mendip.

Local Community Networks

LCNs will be a key vehicle for joint working between the unitary and the parishes. FTC has been advocating for these for 18 months or more and they are firmly embedded into the Somerset unitary model. LCNs will comprise groups of parishes, the relevant unitary Cllrs and others drawn from the private, public and third sectors. They will be tasked “to promote active community decision making, scrutiny, ensure local influence over council and wider public service activity, and to inspire more responsibility for local place-shaping.” (One Somerset Business Plan).

Every part of Somerset will be covered by an LCN. It is likely that there will be a Frome Area LCN, and, alongside our neighbouring parishes, we will be working with the unitary to explore how it may run and what it focuses on. At the time of writing there is no more detail but a verbal update at the meeting will be given if there is anything to add.

Recommendations

1. To decide whether to respond in favour of bring forward the next FTC election to May 2022 or to respond in favour of retaining the four year cycle.
2. Continue with the due diligence exercise around assets and liabilities and work with the other Mendip towns and Mendip DC to explore whether some Mendip assets and liabilities (to be determined by Council) could be transferred before the dissolution of Mendip.