

## Agenda item 9

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

Author: Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

### Summary

This report provides an update on the latest developments in the unitary Somerset project.

Previous updates on unitary developments in [June 2020 can be viewed here on the website.](#) [The November 2020 update can be viewed here.](#) [The March 2021 update can be viewed here](#) and the [September 2021 can be viewed here.](#)

Government has now published the draft structural change order which create the legislative framework for establish the unitary council. Amongst other more technical and largely internal procedural and administrative elements this draft legislation confirms that the name of the unitary will be Somerset Council. At the time of writing, it has not yet been decided when the unitary and the parish elections will be. This date is expected to be confirmed by Government before the end of this month.

### Devolution

Our advisors are carrying out as much due diligence as possible on the major pieces of land, buildings and services that may be devolved to FTC in future. Until we are clear about the likely costs and benefits are we will not be in a position to decide whether to explore with the future Somerset Council devolving these to FTC.

Cllrs, staff and the advisors are meeting for a brainstorming session on 1 December to explore how these assets and liabilities could be run by FTC or a community group for the benefit of the community. This is the first of many conversations that will include the community in future.

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 are interested in acquiring the freehold of the Market Yard car park, the toilets, bridges, river bank and the Cheese and Grain. While there is enthusiasm within FTC, it does now seem unlikely primarily because, with the publication of the draft Structural Change Order, there is a requirement for not only for MDC to agree to the transfer but the Unitary Transformation Committee to approve it too. There doesn't seem to be the time for all parties to fully understand the financial implications of such a transfer. And I can't now recommend that FTC progresses this before the establishment of the unitary council. Even so, we are working on a vision for this area, that will include as much information as possible over costs and benefits, so that we have it ready and waiting when Somerset Council are in a position to work with us

on devolution. This will be incorporated into our wider work that our advisors to carrying out and will only progress following Council approval.

### Local Community Networks (LCN's)

LCNs will be a key vehicle for joint working between the unitary and the parishes and other stakeholders. 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).

It has now been confirmed that the Frome Area LCN will be one of five pilots across the county. Cllr Maxine Crawley, Kate Hellard and I have hosted a series of meetings with the unitary project team and with the embryonic group of parishes that comprise the "Frome Area". The boundary for this LCN and therefore the explicit list of parishes within it have not been agreed yet but we are working with an increasingly coherent group. The Frome Area pilot's subject is looking at children and families and met again two days before the Council meeting. We'll be able to give a verbal update to Council on this.

In summary, the unitary project continues. It is assumed that internal work will progress at pace once the structural change order is approved by Government in the next few weeks. FTC's input into the way the broad project develops will, primarily, be via Paul Wynne who sits on the Unitary Advisory Board alongside other key stakeholders such as the Clinical Commissioning Group, the Avon and Somerset Police, NALC and representatives from the third sector. Paul is formally representing the Society of Local Council Clerks.

FTC's work on due diligence over assets, liabilities and services will be very valuable. This is because being ready and informed will mean we can move quickly when Somerset Council is in a position to open devolution discussions. The Frome Area Local Community Network will evolve quickly given we've been asked to be one of the pilots. This forum will be crucial in time. It's a positive that it will be well established long before most other LCNs and will be able to set the local agenda quickly and work to support and engage with the broader Frome area community.