

Agenda item 3

For decision - Update on the unitary programme

Authors: Cllr Max Wide and Paul Wynne, Town Clerk

Background

On April the 1st 2023 the five Councils serving Somerset: Somerset County Council, Mendip, South Somerset, Somerset West and Taunton and Sedgemoor Council united to form the new Somerset Council.

Included in the business case for the new organisation, to mitigate any potential disadvantages from the centralization of services was a proposal to devolve assets and powers to town and parish councils where appropriate, and to establish local community networks. Frome Town Council sees both these initiatives as opportunities for greater local control over assets and budgets that might be used for the benefit of the people of Frome and the surrounding villages. Work has been ongoing therefore to create a proposition that can be presented to the new council, and as well as this, Frome Town council has played a leading role in establishing and developing the Local Community Network.

In our strategy adopted in November 2022 a series of actions were planned, as part of our work programme and staff and budgets were allocated to the development of this work. The table below provides a summary of the progress of that work to date.

Progress toward a devolution deal for Frome

We set out in our strategy to describe a number of interconnected areas that might form the basis of devolution deal for Frome. Somerset Council have been developing their thinking about the criteria for such a deal and they will shortly be setting out a timetable, including initially a number of pilots to try all these initiatives. It is clear that their capacity to progress such deals will be quite limited, and much of that capacity will be taken up with the establishment of the new Taunton Town Council. Nevertheless our conversations have been positive, and we are hopeful of securing one of the pilot opportunities. This will depend on our ability to develop a coherent proposal at a scale that the new Somerset council can manage.

In our strategy in 2022 we set out the basic building blocks of our proposed 'deal'

1. **Prosperity** The devolution of assets that are crucial to the future prosperity of the town centre and its day and night-time economy. Creating jobs, developing skills, attracting, and retaining businesses, revitalising places and developing talent. Markets have also become an important part of Frome's identity. We want therefore in particular to have greater control over the property assets within the Frome's 'cultural quarter' centred on the market yard; the Cheese and Grain, the river front, the car park, and library, to achieve greater integration with already present assets, Black Swan Arts, and Frome Museum. Through more control and better coordination of these, we believe we can bring greater business development, footfall, and prosperity to the Town, thus benefitting both us and Somerset Council.
2. **Early help.** Added to this, we want to build on work already underway to help ensure that people, especially the young and very old, do not become marginalised and

excluded from the wider community. Working through community groups, businesses, and individuals to stop people falling through the net and remain part of a healthy community. To do this we would intend to devolve available budgets, integrate our activity with Somerset Council initiatives

3. **Open spaces**, the promotion of active travel and the development of business incubation facilities all make for healthier and more engaged lifestyles. In return for the development of this offer we believe Somerset Council will see demand for high-cost crisis services diminish as people lead better lives.

It is clear from our early conversations with Somerset Council that whatever proposal we devise it will need to meet a number of criteria:

1. It needs to meet the 'duty of best value' and show why there is advantage to both the local population and Somerset Council for assets and budgets to be devolved. Whilst the new council has a clear commitment to localism we need to be aware of the fact that the financial challenges it faces are in the 10s of millions and hence any proposal is likely to have to reduce costs as well as improved services and outcomes.
2. It needs to be able to show significant local support and active backing for the idea with local people and groups committed to making it work.
3. It needs to be realistic and achievable with clear, practical and tangible actions for delivery.
4. It needs to identify risks and have clear strategies to mitigate any dangers and be resilient against potential changes.

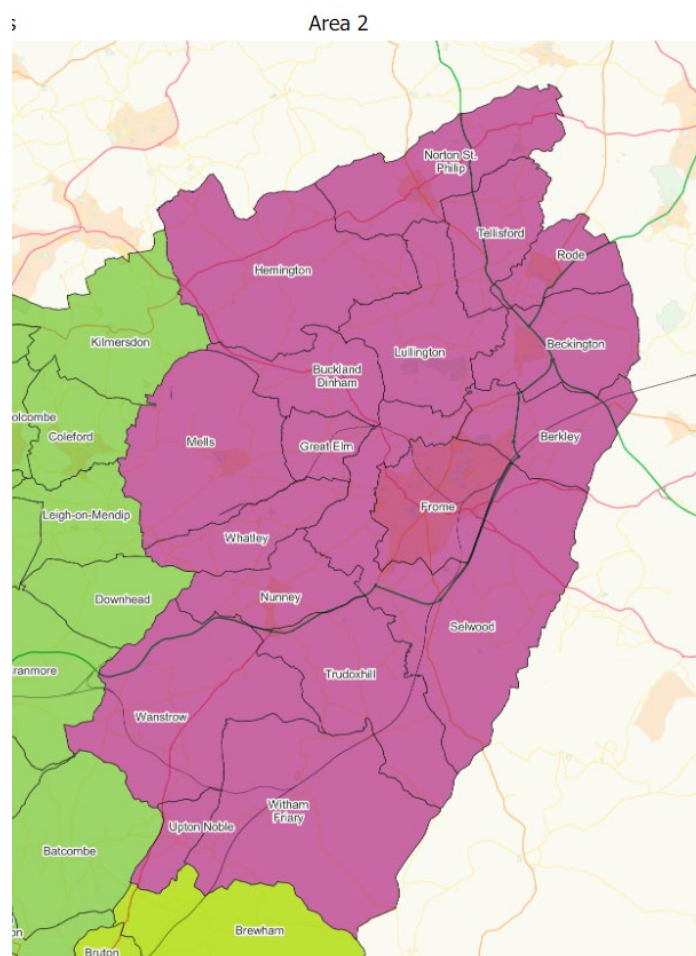
Our thinking is to continue to pursue an ambitious deal for the long-term but broken down into a number of steps or phases which can be more easily managed. We should be clear that we have struggled to make the progress we initially intended, this is in the main due to key staff members leaving or being substantially occupied with other more urgent tasks, and we now propose to use the ear marked reserve to secure additional capacity and expertise to help in the development of our proposition and get our work programme back on track.

Progress with the Local Community Network

Frome was a pilot in the development of Somerset Councils' approach to local community networks. We have committed significant time and resource to convening neighbouring towns and parishes, community groups and public service agencies, making particular progress in the development of sports provision and in the creation of an early help network. We have helped to shape the thinking about the role and remit, membership and operation of the networks across Somerset. We are delighted that our staff member who has led this work will now be in charge of LCN development for the new Somerset council.

The geography of the network

We are now officially in the Frome Area Local Community Network as shown in this map



Parishes

Beckington	Nunney
Berkley	Rode
Buckland Dinham	Selwood
Frome TC	Tellisford
Great Elm CP	Trudoxhill
Hemington	Upton Noble
Lullington	Wanstrow
Mells	Whatley
Norton St. Philip	Witham Friary

The purpose of the LCN is

“To be the focus for the new Council for community engagement and development, within an ethos of local partnership working, looking to improve outcomes for residents through establishing strong connections between Somerset Council, our communities and our partners.”

The role of the networks has been defined for the first year.

1. *Be a forum for community voice, engagement and influence*
2. *Be a means for enhancing participation in democracy and local decision making*
3. *Enhance collaboration by bringing together at a local level, representatives from partner organisations, town, City and parish councils, community groups and residents*
4. *Identify evidence-based community priorities; across Economic, Social and Environmental issues*
5. *Create plans to reflect how the priorities will be addressed*
6. *Identify and secure resource opportunities for local projects*

We are continuing to play a leading role in the network. Cllr Max Wide is the Chair of the LCN and along with the Vice Chairs and Steering Group members will seek to engage with communities and develop in particular a network plan for the whole area.

Summary of work to date

In the table below we provide an update on the Council’s work to agree a unitary deal and develop the Local Community Network. It describes the progress to deliver the various actions identified in the Council Plan with a Red/Amber/Green status update for each. Green indicates that the project is going ahead without issues, amber indicates that there are impacts on delivery or timeline, and red indicates a significant obstacle threatening delivery.

	What will we do	RAG	Progress	Next steps
1	Convene the relevant people to build on the work of mapping social and community assets to ensure that the 'FIND' scheme covers the whole area	Green	Good progress has been made with stakeholders in the 'early help' group (a subcommittee of the LCN area as part of the Connect Somerset funded champions project. Assets mapped and on FIND part of FTC website	Work with Somerset Digital Connect project to transfer assets to Somerset Council website, whilst ensuring that the data is kept up to date and can be fed through locally.
2	Support, in partnership with other parish councils, and public service organisations and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector the development of a comprehensive early help offer	Amber	The Frome Area LCN Working Group has been running for 9 months and has a large number of stakeholders attending regularly. This group has representatives from Schools, Health, CVFSE, Statutory services and Somerset Council Commissioners. This group plays a key role in the gap analysis and development of our local early help offer.	Work on the further development of the community Hub model to enhance the early help offer across the LCN alongside better access to signposting, advice and support. To continue to develop the Working Group and stakeholder representation.
3	Build the local community network and submit the outcome to the County wide evaluation exercise	Green	Pilot Frome Area LCN that focussed on the FIND work now completed and a lessons learnt report submitted	This action is now complete and has shown good outcomes.
4	Support and develop the work of the Local Community Network as a major route to influencing provision in Frome and surrounding areas.	Green	Formal Frome Area LCN now established (July 2023)	Work with stakeholders in the coming months to establish priorities for LNC. Work to build the local plan and ensure buy in from public services.

5	Convene the relevant people to create a vision for the cultural quarter and town centre	Red	Initial discussions held internally to explore and develop a vision	Firm up a draft vision and engage with community to test support and amend as necessary
6	Develop a fully costed and modelled business case that describes the benefits to all parties (of a unitary town deal)	Red	Initial high level town deal pitch drafted and discussed at early stage with SC with positive responses.	Vision for cultural quarter to be firmed up - see above Vision merged with open spaces asset devolution proposals and early intervention work Recognised that we now need to commission a contractor to develop the business plan
7	Create a plan for the managed transfer of assets to the Council	Red	SC to produce Devolution Framework which will create structure for proposed Town Devolution Deal	Construction of Town Devolution Deal so that it is ready to go when Somerset issue a call for expressions of interest, likely November this year.
8	Promote our business case by obtaining cross-party support and engaging with the new Somerset council	Red		Promotion to be carried out once business plan developed and approved

As described in the table, once we have a reasonable vision for the cultural quarter, the next step on the Town Devolution Deal is to pull together the three strands - early intervention, open space devolution and the cultural quarter - and commission a contractor to draft a strategic outline case. This plan is a necessary and crucial step for FTC as it will inform decision making about how it would manage and budget for devolved assets and services.

There was discussion by Council about allocating funds to the business plan in January during the budget setting for 2023/24 process and there was general agreement that this was necessary. We are now at a stage to move forward with this work as described in parts 5-8 in the table. There was no specific allocated budget for this but there is the new projects R&D EMR 358 that could be used. This would be appropriate given the nature of the work. Without drafting a brief and then getting quotes for the work, we will not know for sure how much to allocate for this part of the unitary project. As a result it is proposed to allocated up to £20k which we believe will be sufficient.

Recommendations

1. Note the progress and next steps on the delivery of the work programme in the table above
2. Delegate to the Town Clerk, in consultation with Cllr Wide and Cllr Merryweather, to commission a business plan to enable Council to understand the opportunities and implications of a Town Devolution Deal using up to £20k from EMR 358.
3. Report back with update on progress to November Council