

Agenda item 5

For decision - Update on the unitary programme

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Background

Our previous programme update in August [here](#) provided a summary of our how thinking has developed and is worth reading to remind Cllrs of how we got to where we are.

This report provides the current update in the context of the financial emergency that Somerset Council is in.

A summary of this follows the RAG rating on the programme update and is in the table below.

Progress toward a devolution deal for Frome

We set out in our work to date on Unitary a number of interconnected areas that might form the basis of devolution deal for Frome. These sought to bring together early help initiatives relating to older and young people, with economic development initiatives centred around the cultural quarter, producing less demand for high-cost services and mutual benefit for town and county from increased prosperity and inclusivity. Somerset Council have been developing their thinking about the criteria for such a deal and these include such factors as public support, clear benefits, and safe stewardship of any assets to be devolved.

At the last update in August, Cllrs agreed to commission work to develop a business plan to articulate a 'Town Deal' proposal, and identify the assets, powers and budgets we would like to see devolved as a coherent package, likely to be delivered in phases. We have identified a preferred bidder and are in the process of negotiating and signing contracts, the selected party has a wealth of experience in this area, and we expect them to be with us through December and January, with a final report in February.

In the meantime, however, the deteriorating financial situation of Somerset Council has prompted them to issue a long list of items that they would be interested in devolving or divesting in what has been described as a 'fire sale'. It is clear that long term thinking may be replaced by the need for short term cash, as the Council strives to avoid a s.114 notice (effectively declaring itself bankrupt). This activity will likely subvert in the short term the intention to create whole town deals as was the intention.

In the midst of this, four principles are important for the Town Council:

1. That it does not become drawn into decisions based solely on the current crisis at the County Council. In assessing the desirability of items on the list, we should be aware of the link between items and our declared strategy. Many of the items have at first sight a very strong link, notably those contained in the economic development, cultural facilities, open spaces and community wellbeing and resilience areas.

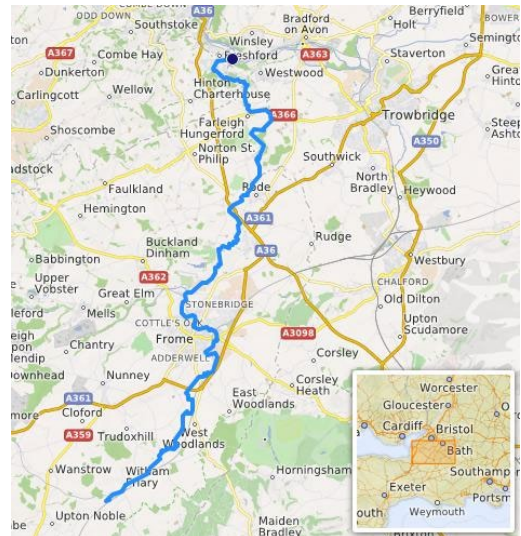
2. That we should develop clear criteria for taking on any additional responsibility based on a combination of alignment with our strategy, affordability in the long term, our ability to deliver and our ability to manage the risks.
3. That we should not be diverted from developing the case for a Frome Town deal that would have a long-term orientation and demonstrate how assets, budgets and powers can be integrated to create a better place. Somerset Council might not be in a position in the coming months to address this, but we will be ready with recommendations for when, inevitably, they have to return to consideration of their long term strategy.
4. That we should involve our partners in the Local Community Network in these conversations as the collective ability of the 18 parishes together could lead to greater capacity than could be achieved separately.

Nationally, it is increasingly accepted that early intervention has a crucial role to play in addressing community needs and budget shortfalls. Many activities in this space may not need Somerset Council to be a funding partner, there will be projects and areas of work that we will probably want to develop ourselves – as we have done over the past decade or more.

Progress with the Local Community Network

Since our last update the following development have taken place:

1. The LCN is now called the ‘Vale of Frome’ this recognises the fact that there are 17 other parishes in the area and the river serves as an important ‘spine’ linking together them together.
2. Work is underway on a survey to determine the themes of a community plan. Members of the County Council will be visiting each parish to conduct a conversation about priorities so that we can collectively discover the issues that unite us. The outcomes of this will be available in February.
3. These themes will then serve as the basis for a calendar of meetings that will allow us to ensure in advance that we have the right people and information in the room so that we can have productive discussions.
4. These themes will also serve as the basis for a written community plan that will contain all the key data to describe the current situation and the key areas for improvement. This plan will be updated to show progress in the selected areas.
5. Meetings of the local community network will now be held in each of the parishes in turn, subject to suitable facilities being available, and this will enable better relationships and a better sense of the interconnectivity between the parishes in the network. Our first meeting outside of Frome town hall was in Buckland Dinham and our next meeting will be in Wanstrow
6. Our meeting in December will focus on the financial situation at Somerset council but also on road safety issues, data has been prepared based on the Vale of Frome geography and we are expecting good representation from the police and from Highways



and we're hoping to draw upon the experience of the Exmoor LCN pilot which has made considerable progress.

	What will we do	RAG	Progress at 7 November 2023	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	Continued good progress via the 'early help' group as part of the Connect Somerset funded champions project. Work continues on the 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.	See left
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	Green	Community Hub established in the Town Hall with outreach work continuing. FTC about the let contract that will explore, develop our thinking and make recommendations on how we take forward our early intervention work and aspirations.	See left
3	Build the local community network and submit the outcome to the County wide evaluation exercise	Green	Complete	
4	Support and develop the work of the Local Community Network as a major route to influencing provision in Frome and surrounding areas.	Green	LCN established. Continue to 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.	See left
5	Convene the relevant people to create a vision for the cultural quarter and town centre	Amber	This work will be part of the business case work below.	Await result of report

6	Develop a fully costed and modelled business case that describes the benefits to all parties (of a unitary town deal)	Amber	This is about to be commissioned and will focus on key assets in and around the cultural quarter and recommendations about developing our work on early intervention	As above
7	Create a plan for the managed transfer of assets to the Council	Amber	Still waiting for SC's Devolution Framework. Given financial situation at SC, we are now working on a list of assets for Cllrs to review that might be available to buy in the coming weeks and months.	Create list of assets and services that might be threatened by the cuts that SC is planning and decide whether they provide functions important enough to the community to retain. Consider whether FTC should retain them.
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

Recommendations

1. Note the progress and next steps on the delivery of the work programme in the table above
2. Report back with update on progress to February Council