

Council – 6th September 2022

Report - Cllr Sarah Wakefield Executive member for LGR and CGR

A. Community Governance Review (CGR) - the setting up of Taunton Town Council as a Parish Council.

1. Since my election to the Executive in May I have attended a number of Parish Council meetings with Cllrs Perry and Rigby to witness the explanation of the proposed draft boundaries and the response of the various PC members. I also attended the Working Group meeting on 16 August. I have also had meetings with our Chief Executive and with Lead Officers and with SWT's governance lawyer and officers in the project team.
2. The consultation on the 2nd Stage of the Community Governance Review for Taunton closed on the 26th July 2022. I would like to thank all those who responded and took part in events throughout the six week period. Since the closure of Stage 2 Officers on the project team have been busy collating and analysing the 501 responses which are more than double the 229 who responded in Stage 1. These responses in their entirety (as well as the analysis) have all been encapsulated and presented to members of the Community Governance Review Working Group in the first instance during August.
3. The responses and the Working Group's final recommendations will form part of the Extraordinary Full Council Report and recommendations which will be forthcoming in late September for final decision at both SWT Full Council on 29 September and SCC Full Council on 5 October. Both councils, in accordance with the applicable transitional regulations, are required formally to approve any re-organisation order setting up the new parish council which is proposed to become Taunton Town Council. Work on the governance provisions for the new council has started and this will continue through the next few months including preparing for elections to the new council in May 2023.

B. Local Government Reorganisation - LGR

1. The Unitary programme is currently focussed most keenly on delivery of Tranche 1 of the programme plan (the first of three tranches - the second and third tranches will deliver parts of the programme after vesting day). Tranche 1 effectively includes everything that is required to transfer district services into the continuing authority (which will become Somerset Council) by vesting day - 1 April 2023. All of our council service teams are involved in detailed planning and work within the programme to ensure the safe transfer of our services and staff and the safe and legal shutdown of SWT on 31 March 2023.
2. Another key programme activity is setting the budget for Somerset Council for 2023/24 and our staff are working with all five Councils and colleagues on reviewing all budgets and options for the estimated budget gap (which is currently widening further under inflation pressures).
3. Business as usual for the SWT remains broadly on track through delivery of the corporate plan, however inevitably there are pressures on resourcing through this period. These pressures are being closely monitored by senior officers on a month by month basis.

4. All Member Briefings for all Councillors across Somerset have been set up by the LGR programme team to occur on a monthly basis and I would encourage all councillors to attend these to understand in more the depth the activities that the programme is undertaking and to ask any questions or raise any issues they may have.

5. I have also participated in the first meeting of the LGR Implementation Board held on 29 July (as a substitute for Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts) and I attended the first meeting of the newly re-constituted LGR Joint Scrutiny Committee held on 19 August. I have had detailed briefings too from our legal officers on the implications and effects of the Section 24 financial restrictions for the county and all district councils in the lead up to unitary. Councillors will have noted that the required Full Council approval has been agreed at all 5 councils to give effect to the Section 24 restrictions. In essence these restrictions mean that district councils may not make financial commitments of certain sizes or lengths (contracts or disposals) and which might fetter the activity of the unitary council going forwards without the consent of Somerset County Council either by its officers (with delegated authority) or the SCC Leader and S.151 officer or by the full council if necessary.

It is clear that everyone involved in working on these difficult and complex projects and unitary workstreams is fully committed to ensuring their success and to the very best outcomes for our residents across our district and Somerset as a whole. It is only fair to say that the detail and sheer volume of work required to achieve these objectives and also to maintain business as usual at SWT is testing at the least and frankly almost overwhelming at worst for our hard-working and dedicated staff. The LGR programme director Alyn Jones has warned that this pressure can only get worse as we approach vesting day and the next few months will be a testing time indeed for everyone. I would like to express my thanks to all our SWT officers who are involved for their dedication and commitment.

Cllr S Wakefield