

Full Council Meeting – 6 December 2022

Portfolio Holder Report for Local Government Reorganisation and Community Governance Review.

Community Governance Review

- Both Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWT) and Somerset County Council (SCC) held special full council meetings in late September and early October respectively to recommend (SWT) and to approve (SCC as the authority with the executive power) the creation of a new parish council for Taunton. This is likely to be known as and is already spoken of as Taunton Town Council. The councils' decisions included other changes to local governance arrangements in the affected parish councils and marked the culmination of two years of intensive work, research and consultation. Special thanks are due to the cross-party working group, which was led by Cllr Derek Perry, and to all of the officers including lawyers who assisted with, and where necessary advised upon, their deliberations throughout.
- Following the making of these council decisions the formal Decision Notice (including the reasons for the decision itself) and the Re-Organisation Order were published and sent to a number of relevant parties as laid out in the statute and guidance. These parties included the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, all Parish Councils affected by the decision, the Local Government Boundary Commission, the Office for National Statistics as well as the Ordnance Survey.
- Following the making of the decision the emphasis has now moved to implementation mode. This will involve setting up the new council over the next 5 months, so that it is able to operate from its vesting day of 1 April 2023 (which of course coincides with the vesting day of the new Somerset Council and the transfer of functions of Somerset West and Taunton to that new unitary council). The implementation process for the new Taunton Council is being overseen both by a Shadow Town Council of members and an Officer Project Group made up of Officers from both SCC and SWT working collaboratively and with technical advice provided by the Society of Local Council Clerks.
- The shadow council members group consists of 26 members including all existing Somerset County Council members for each division which falls either in total or in any part of the new Taunton Town Council boundary, all of the Charter Trustees for Taunton serving until 31 March 2023 (who represent the currently unparished area), and representatives from Comeytrove, Cheddon Fitzpaine, Staplegrove and West Monkton Parish Councils (as each of their boundaries are affected by the changes).
- This shadow council acts as an advisory body and will monitor the delivery of the Implementation Plan which has been drawn up by officers to ensure that a legal, safe and functioning new parish council authority comes into being in April 2023. The members will remain in place until the elected members can take over from the shadow council.
- The implementation plan includes work on a staffing establishment, committee structure and governance arrangements, policies and procedures, budget and precept together with decisions on what assets will transfer to the new council and what services it will wish to deliver with effect from 1 April 2023.
- At their first meeting held on 3 November 2022 the Taunton Shadow Town Council appointed Councillor Tom Deakin as Chair with Parish Councillor Brian Larcombe (of Comeytrove) as Vice Chair. This first meeting also resolved to adopt Terms of Reference and Procedure Rules which will guide councillors and allow them to operate and to carry out business efficiently. Meetings will be held at least monthly as there is much work to do.

- The Elections Team will also be involved in planning and conducting the elections to the new Taunton Town Council. These are due to take place on Thursday 4 May 2023. The new Town Council will have 20 elected Councillors split across 14 wards. Once in post the Councillors will receive a programme of induction training designed to help and guide them so that they can take up their duties of running the new council as soon as possible after their election.
- The latest process, which is now beginning, is the appointment of a Town Clerk. This role is important in the running of the council, organising of meetings and all other arrangements for its safe and legal functioning and effectiveness

Local Government Reorganisation

- Members will have had the benefit of monthly briefings and updates on the progress of the setting up of the Somerset Council which are open to all district and county councillors - one of which was due on 22 November at 5.00pm. I would urge all councillors to attend these online briefings to keep up to date with progress.
- I have attended all meetings of the LGR Implementation Board and the LGR Joint Scrutiny Committee meetings and have listened with interest to reports of progress. A lot of work has been carried out and it is clear that the pace of activity has picked up now that we are only 4 months away from vesting day and since the arrival of the new CEO at Somerset County Council, Duncan Sharkey in October.
- Current notable activity includes the recent start of the process for appointing the senior officers (Tier 2) and the next rung down (Tier 3) at the unitary council and members must appreciate that this is both an important and worrying time for officers who are eventually appointed to these roles as it is also for those who are unsuccessful. Many of the officers engaged in this process over the next few months will themselves be working harder than ever both to fulfil their duties at SWT as well as to satisfy the demands of the workstream to which they are assigned as part of the LGR process.
- As far as SWT is concerned, finance and other meetings are being held and business is continuing as usual. The aim will be to ensure a smooth handover on vesting day and that the public will not be disadvantaged as the changes take place. The process of moving the payroll activity to the new council platform has already started in other districts and SWT will be moving over shortly. This is to ensure that there is no disruption to staff being paid by the new authority.