

Committee: FULL COUNCIL

Date: 19 October 2021

Title: Future of Local Government in Somerset

Purpose of Report

Members to receive updates and consider how they see Ilminster post Somerset Unification

Recommendation:

Members to note the report

Background:

1. Members have resolved to have a permanent agenda item that allows the discussion of the current progress of the Somerset unification of Authorities. This will also allow for updates from various events to be brought to members attention.

Report:

2. On the 7 October both the town clerk and Cllr Shepherd attended the "Somerset Unitary Town and Parish Clerk Conference" held at Bridgewater. It is probably fair to say that there was a shortage of definitive facts about how the unification process will leave Ilminster and other town and Parish councils.
3. It is also clear that the messages that are coming out of both SSSC and SCC at this moment can be at times muddled. Whilst there is information that says there will be Elections for the new authority next May, there is also some information coming through that would indicate that this may be delayed.
4. The notion is that there will be around 20 "Local Community Networks" although what the powers of these will be is still very much up in the air. There are mixed messages coming as to how much they will be involved with planning decisions.
5. It was clear that the LCNs would need to work closely with town and parish council and that in turn these councils should be working closely with various

community groups in their areas. It was also very unclear as to who would have a vote on these LCN's and just what powers they would have. It was said that anyone who wanted to be on one of them could, which does seem to suggest that they could be quite unmanageable groups if not carefully constituted.

6. During a session that was given by representatives of Wiltshire's Area Boards, their equivalent of LCN's it was made clear that over the duration of the first and probably second terms of office of the new authority, these LCN's would need to evolve and mature quite significantly. Their 18 Area Boards have been in existence for over 12 years and have changed significantly during that time.
7. Wiltshire's Area Boards focus on four major things.
 - Community Area Grant
 - Local youth
 - Health Well being
 - Community Area Transport

Each of the area boards is then supported by Democratic Services officers.

8. Until the Structural Change Order is received there is still uncertainty over the number of members the new authority will have. The minimum number being suggested is 85 with the higher number likely to be 110. The Structural Change Order was expected to be delivered week commencing 18 October however this may now have been delayed.
9. If the elections go ahead on 5 May 2022, then the timings will be very tight with the Notice of Election likely to be issued on the 28 March 2022. This means that Purdah will start on this date.
10. It was also made clear that if the elections do go ahead on in May 2022, then the next term of office for Ilminster Town Councillors will be for 5 years in order to maintain parity with the new Unified authority. This does bring opportunities in that it allows members to consider projects that are longer in their gestation to be concluded during their term of office.
11. There would also be insufficient time for a Boundary Review to take place before the May 2022 deadline. This would likely mean that one would occur during the new Authorities first term. The benefits for this would be that some of the issues that arise with LCN during the first term might be able to be addressed.

AGENDA ITEM 21

12. Cllr Shepherd may be able to provide a further update to this report linked to the breakout group that he attended. Likewise Cllr's Keitch and Hamilton may have additional information that has yet to be shared with the town clerk.
13. It is clear that ahead of the Budget setting process that is due to take place on the 30 October 2021, Members will need to consider the financial implications of any assets or provision of services that they think may be beneficial for Ilminster Town Council to acquire from either of the outgoing Authorities.
14. It was stated that any assets should be transferred on a cost neutral basis. This may in fact cause some issues for some town and parish councils as they may need to make some capital purchases ahead of any transfers that take place that would then allow them to make the most of the asset or service provision. This may not be possible as the start up costs associated are significant. For this reason caution does need to be exhibited.
15. Members to note the report.

Mark Tredwin
Town clerk
October 2021