

Chairman's Report from the Local Government Reorganisation Conference Oct 7th 2021

Present : Chairpersons and Clerks of Town and Parish Councils that will come under the new Unitary Authority

Numbers relate to agenda items

1. The Challenge and Opportunity of a Unitary council (Mel Usher, Frome TC)

Change is inevitable, there is no going back on the decision
Promises already made are going to be hard to deliver

The plans will see 5 to 20 new Local Community Networks established 'to give local people the chance to shape their own communities - with real constitutional powers to scrutinise, impact and take decisions'.

Key points :

PCs and TCs must BE MORE AMBITIOUS

Don't worry about permissions JUST DO IT

2. **THIS IS IMPORTANT :**

Local Community Networks

This is how the Unitary Council will be split into chunks.

- There will be 4 - 9 councillors supporting each local group
- Collect local data, not a top down process, pilot studies in place
- Setting policy objectives
- Collaboration with other Parish Councils

Local communities are on their own

- Need to identify the needs of the local people and ways to get the whole community behind the changes
- Local solutions – need to think about 'what are the problems?'
- Local governance – new routes for decision making
- New person in charge (paid?)
- Social enterprises will need to be called on such as Charities, Food Banks, Libraries
- Important to think out of the box not following the way it has always been done

Issues to consider

- What can we be doing? Get together, strength in numbers
- Cross boundaries – who is going to stop us doing things the way we want to?

- Will there be money to pay Parish Councillors appointed to their Local Community Networks as this is going to mean a vastly increased workload

NOTE : We were shown a slide of the proposed boundaries for the LCNs only to have an email the following day to say it wasn't accurate and ignore it

3. Putting the Community in the Lead

- Find the resources that are available
- Somerset Community Foundation works with volunteers and donors to put them together, there is money available
- What is strong in our community? How can we develop this?

4. Somerset Local Government Reorganisation – what's happening now?

In the process of updating assets and how services will be devolved
5 outcomes proposed which will be looked at over the next 6 - 12 months
Pilot studies are in place in to make informed decisions.
Full details of the business plan adopted are on the website
(NB The process is already behind schedule)

5. Breakout sessions

Some problems raised in discussion

- Local Planning Committees should be retained
- Huge reduction in paid staff – who is going to pick up the workload?
- Essential that money follows any devolved responsibilities
- Parish and Town councils will need a paid employee
- If there are Councillors of a particular political party will they be looking after our interests or those of their party in decision making?
- Are we going to be restricted to the number of councillors a Parish or town council can have? Getting more councillors on PC?
- Currently vacancies in local councils for Clerks and Councillors
Where do they think we can find more people or people willing to put in more hours of work for the new Unitary?
- Making large numbers of staff redundant is so expensive that it can take years to recuperate the cost of pay outs. It has been shown with SWT that it large numbers of redundancies can leave the council unable to function and expensive temporary staff need to be hired

A quote from leaders of the Sedgemoor Council

“The Secretary of State is riding roughshod over the people of Somerset who voted 65% to 35% in favour of the Stronger Somerset plan over the other scheme chosen by the Secretary of State.

“That vote was the third time in recent history that the people of Somerset have decisively rejected proposal for a single unitary – following the referendum in 2007 and the Ipsos MORI survey in 2020.

Would it be worth inviting Mel Usher to talk to a Public meeting?
Should we be thinking of more public meetings about the new council?
What do I take from this conference?

- Like it or lump it – it’s going ahead
- The way the Local Community Groups are to be arrange seems vague at the moment
- They profess to consult but there has not been much consultation with PCs before the event
- Very upbeat about how wonderful it will be but there are big holes in the plans to be addressed. Already behind time...
- Some very pertinent questions from the floor illustrate just how concerned Parish and Town Councils are
- Obvious that we are going to be expected to take on a lot more work and without some extra paid staff it will be impossible to do this.
- It’s not easy to get volunteers on the PC as it is.

On the positive side it does look as though we will get more opportunities to input the views of our residents but whether that actually translates into being able to make the changes WE would like is a matter for conjecture.