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# New Somerset Council

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## Somerset LGR Joint Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date – 31 January 2022

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## 1. Summary / Background

- 1.1. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020 the Secretary of State approved the County Councils business case for a single unitary authority in Somerset, to come into being on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 (Vesting Day). This report provides an update to the Joint Committee on the LGR programme and recent activity to deliver it.

This report and appendices are intended to enable the committee to discuss and agree their forward work programme for the next 15 months.

- 1.2. To deliver the benefits proposed in the business case, including freeing up £18.5m per year for frontline services, the County and 4 Districts came together in late summer to begin work. Since then, this partnership has created:
- A mission statement, vision, values and principles for the programme
  - Strong governance and leadership for the programme with representatives from all 5 Councils, including a Joint Committee, Joint Scrutiny Committee.
  - A Programme Board comprising each council's Chief Executive.
  - An officer-led Programme Steering Group and a Programme Management Office to provide structure, support and additional leadership for the entire programme.
  - 6 work streams to coordinate and lead design and delivery of the new council:
    1. Governance
    2. People (Human resources, organisational development, culture and ways of working)
    3. Assets Optimisation (property, information technology)
    4. Service Alignment and Improvement (bringing front-line services together)
    5. Finance
    6. Customers, Communities and Partnerships (Local Community Networks, customer access, devolution, information and data management)

Each work stream is jointly led by a County and District senior manager. Their role is to identify, develop and deliver "products" (specific goods, services and outputs that need to be delivered by Vesting Day) and lead their work stream to deliver them.

- 1.3. We have also set up 3 Local Community Network (LCNs) pilots to test ideas and produce evidence to inform the final design of LCNs. LCNs exist in other unitary councils and have been shown to be successful. They are public forums based in communities allowing discussion, action, oversight, listening, consultation on local issues, and to set priorities and take decisions in the places that will be affected, right across Somerset:
- They are constituted committees of council with real decision-making powers – this also means the devolution of council assets will not apply
  - We anticipate between 15 and 20 LCNs will be set up. Between four and nine unitary Councillors will serve on each LCN joined by local town & parish councils, police, health, education and other partners.
  - They will use local data, evidence and local knowledge to drive decisions and address local issues and priorities.

They will not have a role in Planning and licensing: if they did, they would only ever address planning and licensing applications and issues. Planning matters for example will instead be dealt with through planning committees, set up at an area level.

- 1.4.** We have set up a Local Government Reorganisation Advisory Board to give the public and partners a strong voice in development and delivery of the new council. These meetings take place in public and are currently focussing on LCNs.
- Regular engagement with our towns, parishes and city council on a range of issues including LCNs, asset devolution and supporting communications on LGR to their communities.
    - This includes a range of Town and Parish Council Conferences to promote LGR and discuss opportunities and ideas.
    - Work has also begun, led by Somerset West and Taunton Council, to create a Town Council for Taunton.
    - We are also working with Bridgwater Town Council on an asset and service devolution pilot.
- 1.5.** Other critical work has included:
- Agreement to share the £16.5m implementation costs between the 5 councils: 80% from the County Council, 20% shared between the 4 Districts.
  - Providing information, evidence and advice to the government on their Structural Change Order which is the legislation that will enable the new council to be delivered.
  - Appointing PwC as the programme's quality assurance and delivery partner. They will provide independent, "critical friend" support and challenge throughout the programme. This is best practice for a programme of this size.
  - Appointing an independent communications lead to provide strong internal and external communications and engagement, including common branding.
- 1.6.** Work has continued and during 2022 the programme has already:
- Developed strategic objectives for the programme, to be agreed by the LGR Joint Committee in February
  - Begun work on a Target Operating Model for the new authority
  - Confirmation from the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) that the Structural Change Order is expected to progress through Parliamentary process and be approved during February or March ahead of the "notice of election" on March 21<sup>st</sup>. They have also confirmed that the name of the new authority will be Somerset Council and will be a continuing authority.
  - Developed a finance and assets management protocol for the 5 councils, which will be submitted to the LGR Joint Committee for approval in February
  - Worked across all work streams to finalise products lists and work plans. The work streams are also:
    - Identifying the benefits each product will deliver (cash and non-cash)
    - Agreeing dependencies with other LGR work and other programmes
  - Completed a programme checkpoint review and a programme health check by PwC. Regular checkpoint reviews provide assurance where the programme is on track and shows where we have areas requiring development.
  - Developed a programme scorecard and reporting structure, to go live in February.
- 1.7.** Appendices A and B provide Programme Director updates to the first two LGR Joint Committee meetings, which took place on 5<sup>th</sup> November and 17<sup>th</sup> December 2021. They are included in this report to provide additional background information.

## **2. Issues for consideration / recommendations**

### **2.1. The LGR Joint Scrutiny Committee are asked to:**

- **Note the work that has been undertaken on the programme and scrutinise the report and presentations in appendices A and B dated 5<sup>th</sup> November and 17<sup>th</sup>**

**December 2021**

- **Use this report and presentations to define their forward work programme for the next 15 months**

### **3. Background Papers**

**Appendix A:** Programme Director update titled “Implementation Plan and Programme Governance” for 5th November 2021 LGR Joint Committee:

<http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s20150/Item%206%20-%20LGR%20Programme%20Governance.pdf>

**Appendix B:** “Programme Director Update” for 17th December 2021 LGR Joint Committee:

<http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/documents/s20683/LGR%20Program%20Update%20-%20JC%20171221.pdf>

**Report Sign-Off**

