

Full Council Meeting – 28 March 2023

Portfolio Holder Report for Local Government Re-organisation and Community Governance Review – Cllr Sarah Wakefield.

I would like to say first that during this last year I have very much enjoyed working on and following the progress of both aspects of my portfolio. I have attended meetings of the LGR Board, (several times as substitute for our Leader), and of the LGR Joint Scrutiny Committee together with attending meetings of the CGR working group and latterly the Shadow Taunton Town Council and have also met regularly with officers and consultants involved with these matters. Officers at SWT have been both assiduous in carrying out their work and very helpful to me. This is despite having to cope with all of the additional activity involved in the move to LGR and the setting up of the new Taunton Parish Council. My grateful thanks are due to them all - they know who they are.

Local Government Re-organisation

Vesting Day of 31 March 2023 is now almost here and I am very pleased to report that officers assure me and I am confident that we here at SWT are ready for the launch of the new unitary Somerset Council. Since the announcement of the formation of the unitary council it has been remarkable how the four districts and the county council have formed a programme and worked together in such a collaborative spirit so quickly and so well. This is testament to the willingness and enthusiasm of the employees of all the Somerset councils to take on this project and to make it work.

SWT has played its full part from the outset both in releasing and providing staff to work additionally in the many LGR workstreams together also with satisfying the requirement to protect the services which SWT currently delivers to our residents from vesting day. This has all been done whilst ensuring the continued smooth running of the council and delivering business as usual. I would like also to put on record and celebrate here the hard work and professionalism of our SWT employees not directly involved in the LGR programme but who have taken on and dealt with additional work on behalf of colleagues released to take part in the LGR workstreams.

The LGR programme has been (and still is) very large and extremely complex and at the beginning I certainly wondered how everything could be achieved in the restricted time available but I am pleased to report that services and operations are well prepared for vesting day for our customers, systems and our staff. Day One readiness has been rolled out and staff know what they will be doing and where and how they will be doing it. There are still plenty of further changes to be made after vesting day in terms of management structure and culture change too but we will set out from a strong position. I am reassured too that our financial closedown should happen successfully with plans in place for the essential work on that post vesting day.

Community Governance Review

The journey this year to reach the point we have reached - with the shadow town council meeting regularly since before Christmas, the new Clerk appointed and the process for the elections being held on 4 May well under way - has been long and at times arduous. There have been threats of legal challenges (which has not entirely diminished) and differences

over issues such as assets transfer and the boundary of the new parish - all of which have required careful thought and action. More recently, and with the appointment of the Clerk, we have moved into the implementation phase. The meeting on the 31st January provided a comprehensive update on the first year budget for the Town Council and the implementation budget, on the process for covering civic activity up until the election of a new mayor and a briefing on the Garden Town. Then at the next meeting held on the 28th February 2023 the following items were covered:

- A presentation from Officers and the Lead Member for LGR (Cllr V Keitch) on the emerging Taunton LCN and the broader LCN work going on. To be clear Taunton will be part of a larger LCN and will have one member and one vote on it as will all other town and parish councils in their allocated LCN across Somerset.
- Judicial Review Update with nothing new to note.
- Elections Update – timetable of key dates and an overview of the new Voter ID rules. Strenuous efforts will be made including a redesigned poll card to ensure voters know and understand the new ID requirement.
- Key policies and procedures for Day 1 – e.g. Standing Orders, Financial procedures and a Scheme of delegation were discussed and supported.
- HR Update – on those staff affected in the new Parish and some at SWT.
- Implementation Plan Progress Update – Progress on Tranche 2 actions going well, particularly with IT systems procured and the new website ready to be in place for Day 1.

Prior to the meeting we held a meet and greet for all Shadow Town Councillors to meet the new Town Clerk in the new office space for the Town Council on the ground floor at Deane House. This will be their home for at least the next 12 months.

There has also been a 'Becoming a Councillor' Event held at Deane House on 7th March 2023, which was well attended. It focused on the practicalities of being a councillor and gave an opportunity for the public to discover exactly what that entails and pick up nomination packs. The recording can be watched back at this link;

https://somerwestandtaunton.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/750195

Whilst it is with some sadness that I write this final report - and here I mean sadness at the short life and early demise of Somerset and Taunton Council - I do so in the knowledge that all the hard work I have referred to has provided the environment for a safe transition of our services which will continue to be delivered by our committed and professional staff at the new unitary council and the safe and legal setting up of the new Taunton Town Council. I do of course sincerely wish Taunton Town Council and its new Councillors, once elected, prosperity and success in their endeavours for our town and I also wish the new Somerset Council every success going forwards and am personally delighted that I myself will be part of that new unitary council. To those officers and Councillors who are moving on to new challenges, my very best wishes and thanks for your invaluable contributions.