

Information

for County Councillors

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From:	Alastair Highton
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To:	All County Councillors
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Devolution update: Combined Authority

As you will be aware following debates at previous council meetings, Somerset County Council is working towards a devolution deal to transfer government powers and budgets to the Heart of the South West (HotSW) area.

This work is being led by the Leaders of Somerset and Devon County Councils, all Somerset and Devon Districts, Torbay Council, Plymouth City Council, Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the three Clinical Commissioning Groups.

As a reminder our devolution proposals look to benefit Somerset in the following key areas:

- Increasing productivity and growing our economy
- More jobs and higher skills levels
- Resilience and connectivity
- More homes for those who need them
- Health, social care and wellbeing

Moving towards a devolution deal and Combined Authority

Since submitting our 'Prospectus for Productivity' in February 2016 we have pressed the Secretary of State to begin discussions with us on a devolution deal.

On the 25 May 2016, Cllr John Osman and the Leaders of the other HotSW upper tier authorities met with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to seek his view on our next steps forward.

He advised us that if, by the end of July 2016, each Council and their MPs signed-up to the principle of creating a Combined Authority then the Treasury would be

asked to open up negotiations towards a deal. This is a significant step forward: unlike almost all other areas we have not been asked to accept an elected mayor.

What is a Combined Authority?

A Combined Authority is a way for local authorities to work together on key strategic issues that cross council boundaries and which could be more effectively delivered together rather than separately. Our Combined Authority would be responsible for the powers and funds in our devolution deal once it is agreed.

Combined Authorities are public bodies. Decisions will be made by the existing council leaders working together and there must also be an Audit Committee and at least one Scrutiny Committee. Somerset County Council is leading work on the detail of our Combined Authority.

There is no intention at this stage for the Combined Authority to take existing powers or funding from local authorities, or existing city deal governance structures. Any decision to pass such powers or funding to a Combined Authority, once established, would require the explicit agreement of those constituent local authorities.

What happens next?

On 11 July 2016 a report will be presented to Cabinet recommending that Council give in-principle support to a Combined Authority to deliver our devolution deal once it is agreed. The formal recommendations are as follows:

That the Cabinet endorses and recommend that Full Council:

1. Endorse the Leader's current approach to devolution and agree to sign up to the principle of creating a Combined Authority for the Heart of the South West, as set out in the Prospectus for Productivity, as the basis for negotiation with Government towards a Devolution Deal for the area;
2. Note that giving this endorsement does not commit the Council to entering into a Devolution Deal or becoming a member of a Heart of the South West Combined Authority. This would be subject to future debate and agreement by the Council and subject to negotiations with Government.

The other councils in the Heart of the South West are doing the same, and Cllr John Osman has written to Somerset's MPs to seek their support.

This is the next stage in the devolution process and the plan in the autumn is to run a series of member briefings across all 17 councils to raise awareness of the devolution process and detail of the proposal. Further details will follow.

Full public consultation on any proposal to introduce a Combined Authority will take place in due course as part of the negotiation process with the Government and is required before an Order can be made in Parliament to establish a Combined Authority.

We do not anticipate the EU Referendum result to have an impact on the progress of our devolution proposals however we await clarification: devolution can help us deliver more for our residents and all partners are keen to move our plans forward.

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