District Councillors report Sept/Oct 2021

I recently attended a parish Council unitary meeting this afternoon with officers and members from SCC, still there are no actual answers about the unitary Council but these are the latest possibilities.

There have been several different options put forward for the restructure of the wards which include Blackdown and Tatworth, most of them leave the ward as it is but with just one member, there are two other options both which attach the ward with Chard, the first that it remains part of the County Division of Chard North which will have two members and the second that it joins with three other Chard wards and has two members. We should know what the Governments preferred options will be in late October when the paper will come out, not for consultation but for review. There might be a boundary review in the future which could change the wards/divisions but that normally takes a year so it is most likely that the first term will be with the October proposal

The election for the Unitary will take place in May next year and the elected Councillors will serve a five year term which will bring them back into the electoral cycle of the old County elections. Parishes will have the choice to either have their elections at the same time, May 22 and then a five year term, or pay for their elections themselves. However, eventually you would hope they would want to be in sync with the larger authority so they might have to have a three year term to bring them into line if elections are not held next year.

Again we don’t know if the authority will carry on from the current County council, a continuing authority or be a shadow authority with both District and County Councillors serving out another year. It seems most likely that the County Councillors (who will already have served a five year term) will finish at this election date and the District Councillors will finish their term to March 31st 2023 working alongside the new authority for 11 months.

Now is the time to consider what assets of either Council parishes might like to ask to be handed over to them, nothing can happen until day 1 and the option to be able to take on assets will be an ongoing opportunity. It was stated that they expected the 20 parishes around Chard to become a local community network and that possibly the towns could provide a one stop shop for members of the public to access services which would be run by the unitary authority. We were told that if we didn’t want to take on any of the assets or services they would continue, so hedge trimming etc would happen but if we wanted to take them on and up the service we should be considering raising our precepts now in order to provide those services.

At the most recent SSDC full Council meeting we had an update of the environment strategy, we need to achieve a 10% reduction of carbon emissions each year to achieve being carbon neutral by 2030 (which seems a little silly when we will not exist by 2023) however last year we made our target of 10% and the 2020/2021 year has been a 39% reduction. This is obviously so high because of the pandemic and most of our staff and members are working from home. Our electricity is now provided from renewable sources but gas is still sourced from non-renewable supplies. We have secured two grants for energy efficiency, one for improvements to park homes and the second to decabonise heating in our estate.

There has been a no mow trial at 15 sites across the District and surveys on invertebrate and flower species will soon be in. we are hoping to be able to circulate this information to parishes to see which ones would like to be involved in the scheme for next year. The tree giveaway scheme will be replaced with a wildflower seed giveaway, this will include workshops so that people can see how to prepare the ground for best results, also floral survey training will be provided. The team are also putting together a schools pack as a way to provide information for our schools on environmental good practice, this was a suggestion from one of the local environment champions.