

# **Sedgemoor Disability Forum 1<sup>ST</sup> May 2007**

## ***(1) Proposal for a Unitary Authority for Somerset***

Sedgemoor Disability Forum (SDF) The Forum received two presentations regarding the proposals for a Unitary Authority.

The first was by representatives from Somerset County Council including Alan Jones, Chief Executive, Cllr Cathy Bakewell Leader of the Council and in attendance Mark Stone Head of Service for Localisation and White Paper Implementation.

The second presentation was by representatives of Sedgemoor District Council comprising Kerry Rickards Chief Executive, Cllr Duncan McGinty Leader of the Council and Bob Brown, Corporate Director. Copies of the presentations are available from SAIN. No formal minutes were taken but general points were noted as outlined below. Approximately half of the Forum were aware of the Unitary proposals.

Key issues raised by the Forum addressed issues such as:

- Somerset County Council need to provide every household with a simple summary of the proposals (this is only available as a website download).
- A view was expressed that one authority could realistically make a better impact on negotiating investment for Somerset.
- There was a concern that the Unitary proposals were not upfront about the 'disadvantages' not in a way that would undermine the rationale, but in a way that foreshadows challenges.
- There was doubt about whether it would achieve savings for the local taxpayer.
- Whilst Unitary was said to reduce postcode lottery service provision – although it was highlighted this issue currently exists for sensory loss service users of Adult Social Care at Somerset County Council.
- There was a view that Sedgemoor might have it wrong in locating so much housing in the district when there are not the employment prospects.
- Losing district identity was a concern – needs are distinct and one solution was not necessarily required.
- Is saving money through organisation change a Red Herring?
- Would one Authority covering such a large and diverse area be sufficiently informed about the needs of a wide range of communities?

**Following the session the Forum had a discussion and a number of points were raised comprising:**

- The case put forward for Unitary status was impressive but Sedgemoor's case was more compelling.

- Sedgemoor appeared to have local people more 'at heart' – the Unitary bid was money focused.
- Unitary proposals could simplify things for service users.
- The Unitary case was good but there were weak points about the time to deliver the project.
- Both approaches demonstrated they could save money. However the view expressed for the Unitary bid is that the money saved would leave Somerset to benefit the Treasury and not Somerset itself.
- The change to Unitary would lose continuity in the officers we already know.
- Given a new Unitary Authority would require newly elected councillors, would they honour the ambitions of the scheme?
- Will it actually change anything?
- Services will be under pressure to constantly achieve financial savings.
- Improvements to services could be delayed during any transition.

The Forum held a secret ballot with the results below

Support for Unitary 4      Support for Two Tier 8      Other/don't know 2

## ***(2) Local Highways Presentation***

An informal presentation was made by Ioan Rees - Head of Highways and Passenger Transport, Somerset County Council and Lawrence Hackling, Assistant Highway Service Manager, Sedgemoor Area Highways Office. The reason for this invitation was because a number of previous issues raised at the Forums, concerned highways.

The nature of the discussion focused around accessibility

Key points included:

- When major new developments or roads are being built it is the responsibility of the developer to locate accessible features, notably dropped kerbs. This is as much a planning issue as a highway issue but set against a wide raft of design issues the location of dropped kerbs can be overlooked or not thought through. In some authorities the disability/equalities officer has advised or trained planners to improve advice to developers on suitable design standards for accessibility – Additional advice on these matters could be a role for the Forum.
- SAIN's involvement as an organisation in planning applications was also discussed. This has since been clarified and can be noted that as an organisation SAIN receive a copy of all new planning applications submitted to the County Council to review from a disability perspective. In general these applications are education related although SAIN have been involved in road schemes such as the Blue Anchor esplanade.

- Annual budget for installing one off dropped kerbs is £15,000 and installation costs are around £1,000 a pair of kerbs (either side of a road)
- Individuals can, subject to Highways approval of both the project and the contractor, pay for their own improvements for dropped kerbs. Failure to install a suitable design can leave the householder responsible for costs to replace.
- Other funding could be available from County Councillor discretionary funds (£5,000 each), County Council Local Area Panel funds (c. £200,000)
- The Highways Authority is monitored for standards on Crossings and due to changes in national methodology and the discretion of local inspectors performance in this area has dropped. In order to resolve these issues the Highways Authority will have to prioritise what improvements are required – this could be a role for the Sedgemoor Disability Forum and SAIN in future to highlight where disabled people see the priorities. They are also happy to collate requests for highway improvements to keep for consideration when future planning/funding allows.
- An individual can also write direct to the Area Highways Office with individual requests where improvements are identified.

Notes by Chris Avanti and Mandy Seaman of SAIN.