

Chamber Chatter

The Voice of local business in Taunton Deane

September 2016

TAUNTON
CHAMBER
of
COMMERCE

Councils say 'yes' to merger

Two Somerset Councils are making history by becoming among the first in the country to progress towards a formal merger – subject to Government approval.



Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council have now both voted in favour of joining forces to create a new, single authority and so make significant savings to protect vital community services. They have also agreed to implement a shared programme to change the way services are delivered and how decisions are made – a process known as “transformation.”

Taunton Deane voted for the merger in July and now West Somerset Council has also agreed in principle to the move which is subject to Government approval because it will mean a new, single authority covering both geographical areas being created. The Leaders of the councils say the pioneering agreement will better protect vital services for residents in both existing council areas for now and into the future. The authorities entered into partnership in 2013 and are currently delivering annual savings of £1.8m. The merger will formalise the links between the two authorities while scrapping costly duplication and reducing bureaucracy.

Leader of Taunton Deane, Councillor John Williams, said: “This is a huge and radical step – one that is being taken to make us fit for the future and stronger together. As one council covering Taunton Deane and West Somerset, we will not only save money to invest in our community but have a far stronger voice. “It is a brave and ambitious decision and cements the solid partnership that was created three years ago. We have come a long way together and we can make a fresh start as a single authority. Now agreement has been reached, we will undertake appropriate consultation as part of the process.”

Councillor Anthony Trollope-Bellew, Leader of West Somerset Council, said: “It was a tough decision to make, the hardest I have faced in 15 years in local government, but we owe it to our community now – and future generations – to show strong leadership and do what is right. We are taking control of our future rather than waiting for a solution to be imposed. Our residents will still receive the services they rely on – if we had done nothing the future of those services were at risk. We are putting people, rather than politics, first.”

Now both councils have agreed to proceed with the process towards merger, it will be for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to approve the move. A decision on the number of councillors will also be for the Secretary of State to approve, once local proposals have been submitted.

A programme of partner involvement is now being prepared and will be widely publicised. The merger is underpinned by a radical review of how services will be delivered in future. The aim is to streamline and modernise processes to bring them into the 21st century. There is a focus on local delivery, bringing the council to the people, and a greater use of technology so that transactions can be completed online 24/7 while still retaining the help for those without the ability or facilities to use this.

The changes will have a cost – new technology for example - but the merger will, conservatively, deliver savings of some £3.1m a year. The Leaders said: “Our message to our communities is one of optimism and the strong belief that by merging our councils we can protect the services that people rely on. It's local government that will change, not our people, not our values and not our determination to succeed.”

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EVENTS DIARY 2016

OCTOBER 2016

THURSDAY 19th October

Business Breakfast in association with Porter Dodson

Guest Speaker: Sarah Young, Employment Solicitor

'Brexit - The Ifs, Buts and Maybes ...

NOVEMBER 2016

THURSDAY 10th November

(Please note change of date)

Networking Lunch at King's College

Guest Speaker: Brendan Cleere, Taunton Deane Borough Council

DECEMBER 2016

FRIDAY 2nd December

Christmas Networking Lunch at The Castle Hotel

For further information or to book a place at any of these events, please email Jane, Chamber Administrator, at office@taunton-chamber.co.uk



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MEMBERS' NEWS AND EVENTS

Milsted Langdon's expert forensic evidence leads to acquittal at major theft trial

In a complex case involving a high street bank, alleged missing funds and an employee's reputation, expert evidence given by Milsted Langdon on behalf of the defence was instrumental in securing a 'Not Guilty' verdict.

Helen Gregory, director of Forensic Accounting at award-winning firm, Milsted Langdon, recently gave evidence at Taunton Crown Court in defence of a cashier charged with theft from her employer.



Helen's meticulously researched and professionally delivered forensic evidence comprehensively overturned the prosecution's case which was based upon manipulation of bookkeeping entries to disguise missing funds. The defendant asserted that she undertook these to correct an automated entry and professed her innocence throughout the trial.

Helen's investigations identified weaknesses in the bank's financial accounting processes. Her oral evidence – which referred to the lack of CCTV footage of cash removal – convinced the court that the prosecution had failed to prove the defendant had physically taken or used the missing money, deposited it in her own bank accounts, or otherwise benefited from the funds she had allegedly stolen.

The trial judge found that, in light of Helen's evidence, the prosecution's assumptions were insufficient to support its contentions of theft. The judge ordered the jury to return a verdict of 'Not Guilty' after halting the trial only two days after it began.

Helen said: "I am pleased my professional knowledge and experience enabled me to present convincing evidence for the defence, in whose favour this criminal case was settled."

Warnings on dangers of online court

Roger Isaacs, a partner at Milsted Langdon LLP, has warned of the possible dangers of an online court.

On Wednesday, Lord Justice Briggs published his Civil Court Structure Review, which included a recommendation that an online court should be established for use by lay people with "minimum assistance from lawyers."

Under the plans set out by Lord Justice Briggs, money cases valued at less than £25,000 would automatically go before the online court where the merits of a case would initially be assessed as part of a triage process. If the case cannot be resolved at that stage, it will then go before a judge for determination. Roger, who specialises in forensic accounting and is a qualified mediator, said: "The substantial reductions in Legal Aid mean that access to justice is increasingly difficult for all but the wealthiest individuals. For that reason, anything that can make the provision of justice more efficient and affordable is to be welcomed."

He added: "That said, there is little doubt that the proposals for an online court are driven by cost-cutting motives. In this context, it is not the move to an internet-based system that is of concern per se, or even the possibility of dispensing with lawyers – whose services those with very small claims tend not to be able to afford in the firm place – but what would be troubling would be if disputes were to be assessed by anyone other than a member of the judiciary."

Lord Justice Briggs' recommendations will now be considered by the government, senior judges and HM Courts and Tribunal Service.

Ongoing succession success for Milsted Langdon's Corporate Finance team

Prominent chartered accountancy firm Milsted Langdon has recently undergone unprecedented expansion, recruiting a dozen new staff to meet increased demand across the South West for its award-winning services.

The firm's four regional offices have all welcomed new employees, and its Corporate Finance team has had a major boost with the arrival of Senior Manager, Juliet Bacon and Assistant Manager, Stephanie Morgan.

Milsted Langdon's Corporate Finance Team, headed by partner Susannah Adams, offers advice and guidance to business owners of all sizes on securing finance, expansion and/or exit, either through buying or selling a business, sourcing appropriate funding, and/or restructuring to enable management successors to come through.

The team also regularly advises on business valuation, and suitability for sale or purchase, and is always willing to undertake an initial consultation on these matters without charge or obligation.

Since January, the team has completed seven corporate deals, two of which followed the supposed 'economic Armageddon' of Brexit, with no changes to their terms, including a sale to a German acquirer. These transactions have been a mix of acquisition, sale and (for an all-female team, perhaps ironically named) 'BIMBOs' – Buy-In, Management Buy-Outs – of Derby-based aerospace engineering firm Phoenix CNC, and Doncaster vehicle component manufacturer Juratek.

Partner and Team head, Susannah Adams, said: "Uncertainty is the buzz word following Brexit, and while it would be naïve to ignore the challenges ahead, times never have been, and never will be, certain.

"It is hard to imagine that the words of Kipling are over 120 years old, as they could have been written yesterday – 'if you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs...'. No-one can give you certainty, but we are well placed to give you the only real alternative – sound commercial advice and guidance. Come and talk to us."

Local law firm recommended in the Legal 500

Somerset and Dorset based law firm, Porter Dodson, has once again been recommended in the leading industry guide, Legal 500 UK (2016).

Porter Dodson has been ranked for its Corporate and Commercial; Commercial Litigation; Employment; Contentious Trusts and Probate; Family; Personal Tax, Trusts and Probate; Education; and Commercial Property teams.

Additional recommendation by the Legal 500 was given to several Porter Dodson lawyers for a consecutive year: Richard Baker, Rebecca Marshall, Sharon Collier, Bruce Weir and Stephen Wray, who was also listed as a 'Leading Lawyer' in this year's publication.

Brian Maxwell, Evelyn Adfield, Adrian Poole, Cathryn Smith, Kate James, Lesley Gaskell and Louise Sanders have also been recognised for their work.

Managing Partner, Robert Fox, said: "I am delighted that Porter Dodson has been recommended once again in the Legal 500. To be recognised for the commitment we make to providing expert legal advice to our clients is fantastic and testament to the hard work and dedication of the team."

The Legal 500 is an independent directory of law firms in the UK, recommending and ranking them based on in-depth market research, positive client feedback and interviews with lawyers, solicitors and barristers.



Pardoes Polo afternoon

A record number of guests enjoyed prosecco and tea and cakes in the searing September sun in the latest Taunton polo event sponsored by Pardoes.

Teams from Taunton, Yeovil, Bridgwater and Dorchester and Bridport - all which have Pardoes offices located in the towns - battled it out at the Taunton Vale Polo Club in Orchard Portman.



A Chukka in full swing at the Pardoes Polo afternoon at the Taunton Vale Polo Club



The winning team was the team representing the Taunton office. Pardoes' Partner, Bhavani Hogarty said: "It was incredible and unexpected weather for this time of year. Everyone had a wonderful time, particularly those who have never been to a polo match before."

Maeve Vickery, Pardoes Partner presents a prize to Amanda Norman, Polo Manager, at Taunton Vale Polo Club with Nigel Muers-Raby, Pardoes Head of Marketing looking on.

