

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held as a **Virtual Meeting** using **Zoom meeting software on Tuesday 8 September 2020.**

(2.00 pm - 3.30 pm)

Present:

Members: Councillor Crispin Raikes (Chairman)

Robin Bastable	Sue Osborne
Nicola Clark	Robin Pailthorpe
Brian Hamilton	Dean Ruddell
Charlie Hull	Jeny Snell
Mike Lewis	Mike Stanton
Paul Maxwell	Gerard Tucker



Also Present:

Val Keitch	Peter Seib
Gina Seaton	Linda Vijeh

Officers

Alex Parmley	Chief Executive
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Strategy and Commissioning)
Jan Gamon	Lead Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Stephanie Gold	Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)

167. Apologies for absence (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mike Lock and Rob Stickland. Councillor Dean Ruddell was present as substitute for Councillor Rob Stickland.

168. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

169. Public question time (Agenda Item 3)

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

170. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 4)

The Chairman reminded everyone that the purpose of the meeting was to consider and comment upon the Stronger Somerset business case, rather than to debate and compare the Stronger Somerset business case with the County's One Somerset business case.

171. Stronger Somerset Business Case (Agenda Item 5)

The Leader introduced the Stronger Somerset Business Case and conveyed her thanks to the officers involved. She acknowledged there were a number of 'typos' in the document and reassured members that the errors were currently being addressed and corrections would be made prior to submission to government.

The Chief Executive provided an overview and set the context for the districts' case for the future of local government in Somerset. It was not only about financial savings, and it went beyond just setting up two unitary authorities. The districts' proposal was different, and sought to be a more integrated and collaborative system of local government.

The Programme Director noted several questions had been raised at other meetings and briefings about why two unitaries would be better than one, and she provided members with an explanation and noted the benefits.

During discussion, members raised several comments and observations, including:

- Members commended the work of the Stronger Somerset team for producing a very strong business case in such a short timescale, and during such challenging times. (Covid-19 pandemic)
- Some members felt that the Executive Summary did not provide enough insight into the full contents of the business case.
- Section 2.1 About Somerset - Some members felt that education was not featured enough throughout, specifically the issue of young people moving away from Somerset for higher education and better career opportunities.
- Members sought clarity on the use of 'combined authority' terminology.
- Members questioned the timing of the re-organisation given the current Covid-19 pandemic.
- Section 3.3 Shortlisted options summary descriptions - A member questioned the difference between the current county/district structure and the two East/West councils for Somerset.
- Members questioned the comparisons between East and West Somerset. i.e. economic. Are they fair?
- A member highlighted some inconsistencies with area measurements throughout the report. Members suggested using either square miles or square kilometres but not both.
- Some members felt the use of acronyms (i.e. PMO/RMO/SRO) and 'management speak' needed further explanation. Members suggested a glossary would be useful.
- Members enquired as to if / when further engagement with ALL councillors would take place.
- Section 4.2 Stronger Somerset cares - One member expressed concerns regarding The Children's Trust, its numbers and complexity.
- A member sought clarity on the recommendations around the role of public health in the new authority.
- In general, some members found the document difficult to read and understand. Members felt some of the graphs (specifically Section 2.3 Drivers for Change) and scoring models (Section 3.4 critical success factors) were unclear and inconsistent.
- One member commented on the font size, colour scheme and overall layout of the document, suggesting it was not particularly easy to read.
- District Executive report Section 4 recommendation B - One member sought reassurance that this recommendation permitted the Leader or Chief Executive to make minor amendments only.

- Some members felt that both councillors and the public were being asked to choose between the SCC One Somerset business case, and the Districts Stronger Somerset business case. Some members were concerned that neither business case fully addressed some of the key issues, making this a very difficult choice.

The Leader, Chief Executive and Programme Director responded to comments and points of detail raised during discussion, and some of their responses included:

- Clarification about combined authorities – what they are and what they do.
- Information about proposed boundaries and an overview of discussions with ministers.
- The proposal would dissolve the existing Somerset authorities and create two new ones and would not be a merger of two authorities per se.
- Acknowledge some areas of Mendip may prefer to look North, however, Bath & North East Somerset Council and North Somerset Council had indicated they did not want to be involved in discussions.
- Stronger Somerset is about reform and re-organisation. One Somerset is possibly simpler and primarily only deals with re-organisation.
- Information about how Public Health and the Children's Trust might operate.
- Reassurance that the delegation to make changes, as detailed in recommendation B of the District Executive report, would only be for minor amendments.
- There had been a very short timeframe to come up with the business case. A full business case was still to be prepared over coming months and through further engagement.
- Reassurance that if the government responds saying one unitary for Somerset, then all the Somerset authorities would work together for the best outcome possible for the people of Somerset.
- All Town and Parish Councils had been invited to briefings to explain the Stronger Somerset business case and to gauge views.

At the conclusion of debate, in line with how the other districts had considered the business case at Scrutiny Committee, the Chairman asked members to indicate their support for the recommendations going forward to District Executive. On being put to the vote, 10 members indicated their support, 1 against and 2 abstained.

ACTION: That the comments made during discussion be circulated to District Executive members for consideration.

172. Date of next meeting (Agenda Item 6)

Members noted the next meeting of Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for Tuesday 29 September 2020 at 10.30am and would probably be held as a virtual meeting using Zoom.

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Chairman