

South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a special meeting of the **District Executive** held as a **Virtual Meeting** using **Zoom meeting software** on **Thursday 10 September 2020**.

(9.00 am - 9.45 am)

Present:

Councillor Val Keitch (Chairman)

Jason Baker
Mike Best
John Clark
Adam Dance

Sarah Dyke
Peter Gubbins
Tony Lock
Peter Seib



Also Present:

Brian Hamilton
Karl Gill
Sue Osborne
Crispin Raikes
Mike Stanton

Clare Paul
Gina Seaton
Martin Wale
Linda Vijeh

Officers:

Alex Parmley
Martin Woods
Nicola Hix
Kirsty Larkins
Richard Ward
Jan Gamon
Stephanie Gold
Angela Cox
Michelle Mainwaring
Jo Morris
Becky Sanders

Chief Executive
Director (Place)
Director (Support Services)
Director (Strategy and Commissioning)
Monitoring Officer
Lead Specialist (Strategic Planning)
Specialist (Scrutiny & Member Development)
Specialist (Democratic Services)
Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)

Note: All decisions were approved without dissent unless shown otherwise.

194. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 1)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Henry Hobhouse.

195. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

196. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 3)

The Committee were addressed by the Chairman of Bruton Town Council. He thanked the Chief Executive and Leader of Council for their meeting with Bruton Town Council the previous day to discuss the Stronger Somerset business case and he said they welcomed the proposals as a significant step forward from previous discussions. He highlighted 4 points as:-

- Genuine devolution to Town and Parish Councils with the SALC recommendations of local power, local presence, local governance.
- Recognise there was a lot to be done in the care sector which was currently operated by SCC and detail would be added over the next year.
- The reference to climate emergency throughout the business case and building resilience and designing it into a new system.
- Ask for a proportionate voting system.

The Chairman said it was the Council's intention to work closely with SALC and the Town and Parish Councils on the Stronger Somerset business case and she thanked the Chairman of Bruton Town Council for his contribution.

197. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 4)

The Chairman said it was a very important day for Somerset with the debate of the Stronger Somerset Business Case.

198. Stronger Somerset Business Case (Agenda Item 5)

The Chairman said the timetable for the unitary proposals had been escalated as the County Council had already submitted their One Somerset unitary authority bid to the Secretary of State. She outlined the history of the work of the 5 Somerset Councils to work more closely to deliver local government in a better way and the decision of the County Council to pursue their single unitary bid. The Stronger Somerset bid by the 4 District Councils proposed two unitary councils which focussed on sustainable services, a stronger economy and improved quality of life. She said over the previous 30 years, various forms of unitary governance had been proposed, the most recent being 2007 which was not pursued by the Government.

The Chairman said the proposals were not just about reducing costs but also finding a better way to use the available resources. The current financial challenges would not improve soon and the demand for services would not reduce. If the District Councils were invited by the Secretary of State to submit a business case for unitary status then they needed to be able to respond in a timely manner. She commended the Business Case to Members and invited questions.

Councillor John Clark said he supported the business case and read out a statement explaining his reasons as scale, democracy and reform. He said there were currently 269 County and District Councillors representing a population of 569,000 which was 2,115 residents per Councillor. The single unitary option proposed 100 Councillors which would mean nearly 6,000 residents per Councillor which was a 63% reduction in local representation. The two unitary proposal would mean a reduction of 26% which was acceptable. He said the District Councils were more involved with local towns, villages and residents and he felt the single unitary authority would not embrace the current local involvement.

During discussion, the following points were made:-

- There was no recognition of the current differences between County and District Authorities roles and services.
- The County proposal was the disbanding of all 5 Somerset Councils and together forming a new one with the shadow cabinet comprising of the existing Leaders and Chief Executives of all 5 councils. It was not a take-over by one council or another.
- The Stronger Somerset business case needed typos correcting.
- Somerset should learn from the mistakes made by previous unitary authorities during their formation.
- The business case had looked at the issues facing Somerset and there was a stronger link to communities and councillor representation in the Stronger Somerset bid. It also acknowledged the differences in industry between the east of the county and the west.
- Modern ways of working through collaboration with a wider partnership were proposed in the Stronger Somerset bid.
- The last unitary council bid in 2007 was not supported by the local population in the poll.
- Each Unitary Authority would have its own Constitution but there may be some services which could be delivered in collaboration with the police, health sector, Town and Parish Councils and local communities so they were focussed on outcomes.
- The proposed Childrens Trust would be separate in a similar way to the current Somerset Waste Partnership and would provide services jointly commissioned by the Unitary Councils.
- A Combined Authority was not a separate tier of Government but set up specifically to deliver outcomes.
- Change had to be made in local government and the Stronger Somerset business case would provide better representation for the people of Somerset.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee said they thanked the Programme Director and her team for producing the Stronger Somerset business case during the pandemic and were impressed by the thoroughness of the document. He said that most of their questions sought clarification and responses were provided by the Chief Executive and Programme Director. Further detail had been requested on Education and the Childrens Trust to be set up. A glossary had been requested. Overall it was felt the proposal would provide better outcomes for the people of Somerset and a better democratic representation.

The Chairman stressed that the business case was only outline and further work would be done to add detail. She thanked the Scrutiny Committee for their comments.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Chairman proposed the recommendations and they was seconded by Councillor Peter Gubbins. A named vote was taken and the recommendations were unanimously confirmed by Members.

RESOLVED: That District agreed to:-

- a. endorse the Business Case for the reform of local government including the creation of 2 unitary Councils within Somerset, and recommend its approval to full Council, at the next meeting on 10th

September 2020;

- b. delegate authority to the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, in consultation with the other Somerset District Leaders and Chief Executives, to make minor amendments to the Business Case as necessary and / or appropriate, ahead of its submission to the Secretary of State;
- c. support the continuing consultation with local stakeholders, above and beyond any programme of consultation that may be required by the Government in due course;
- d. note that in the best interests of the communities and residents of South Somerset, the Council will continue to work with colleagues across all tiers of local government and public service in Somerset.

Reason: To propose the Stronger Somerset Business Case and Executive Summary to Full Council for the purpose of submission to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in September 2020.

(Voting: unanimous in favour)

199. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 6)

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the District Executive would take place on **Thursday, 1st October 2020** as a virtual meeting via Zoom meeting software commencing at 9.30 a.m.

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Chairman

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Date