

Stronger Somerset Business Case

Executive Portfolio Holder:	Val Keitch, Leader of the Council
Strategic Director:	Alex Parmley, Chief Executive
Lead Officer:	Jan Gamon, Programme Director
Contact Details:	Jan.gamon@southsomerset.gov.uk

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 Members will be aware that the Leader of Somerset County Council has stated that he wishes to pursue the option of a single Unitary Council for Somerset. The position has now advanced to one where Somerset County Council has approved a Business Case for the creation of a single Unitary Council for Somerset and this has been submitted to the Secretary of State.
- 1.2 Members will also be aware that the District Councils had been pursuing a model of increased collaboration, however this has been challenging given the lack of participation of the County Council, and more recently the Government has indicated it would wish to see unitary solutions to all parts of England currently covered by “two tiers” of County and Districts.
- 1.3 Therefore, the District Councils have been working on the development of a Business Case for the reform of local government including the creation of two new unitary Councils for Somerset, as well as significant change focussed on sustainable services, a stronger economy and improved quality of life.
- 1.4 This report presents the Business Case for District Executive to consider ahead of it being presented to full Council for consideration.

2. Forward Plan

- 2.1 This report did not appear on the District Executive Forward Plan as the timing for submission of the business case to the Secretary of State only became clear very recently.

3. Public Interest

- 3.1 This report outlines the case for change in Somerset; a case for reform and reorganisation to deliver better outcomes for the people, places and businesses in Somerset. This is detailed in the Stronger Somerset Business Case and summarised in the Executive Summary. It has been prepared for the purposes of submission to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in September 2020.

4. Recommendations

4.1 District Executive is asked 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.

5. The Stronger Somerset Business Case

5.1 Introduction and Background

The debate about the best form of local government in Somerset has been ongoing for a number of years. In the last 30 years various forms of Unitary Government have twice been proposed, most recently in 2006 when an initiative to create one Unitary Council for the whole of Somerset did not win the backing of Government.

The issues that drove that debate, however, have not gone away. Over the past two years the 5 Councils of Somerset have been exploring together the best way to address the challenges we face, and, under the banner of FoLGIS (Future of Local Government in Somerset) commissioned research into the options for the future. The aim has not been to simply cut costs, the intention has been to find a way, through the better use of our resources, to sustain vital services now and for the future whilst also dealing with some of the big challenges Somerset and its communities face.

Based on a collective view of the financial challenges that we face, the growing demand pressures for services likely to stem from a growing and aging population, and the opportunities inherent in a relatively low level of collaboration and sharing in the past, we concluded that change needs to happen to ensure that we do the best we can for the communities of Somerset and for local government to be financially sustainable.

We have considered the impact on our services and communities of continuing on the current path and concluded that “no change” is not an option. The only real question is what changes do we need to make and when shall we do it?

Although the FoLGIS work was commissioned by all five Councils, more recently Somerset County Council has stated that it believes a unitary approach is its' preferred way forward. In making this statement it has subsequently developed a Business Case for the creation of a single unitary Council for Somerset. This Business Case was approved by Somerset County Council in July 2020, and it is understood that this has now been submitted to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Coinciding with this, it has become increasingly apparent that the Government is likely to be driving a 'unitarisation' agenda in its much anticipated White Paper on Devolution, which is expected to be published this Autumn.

The Somerset District Councils have therefore had to be cognisant of this emerging agenda, and whilst a collaboration model had been the preferred option, this was clearly not going to be a viable option going forward, with the County Council having clearly stated its preference.

It is the case that the District Councils recognise that change is needed. However, it is believed that a single unitary Council will not deliver the change needed. In addition, simply reorganising in the traditional way proposed in the One Somerset business case, is not enough to drive improvements in the economy and quality of life in Somerset or secure sustainable services. For this reason the District Councils have worked together to develop a model for the reform of local government including the creation of 2 new unitary Councils in Somerset, which is considered to both provide significant financial savings whilst also remaining close to the communities that 'local' government is here to serve. The proposals set out a significant change in the way that local government would work, to create a much more collaborative approach to service provision and driving improvements in Somerset, focussed on the needs of residents, communities and businesses.

5.2 Next Steps

Assuming that the Secretary of State invites the Somerset District Councils to submit a proposal for the future of local government in Somerset, then we need to be in a position to respond in a timely manner.

The Business Case for a "Stronger Somerset" has been developed by the Somerset District Councils, and is attached as Appendix A to this report.

The "Stronger Somerset" Business Case is due to be considered by all District Councils in Somerset over the coming weeks, and subject to receiving the necessary approvals will be submitted to the Secretary of State.

6. Financial Implications

The financial implications of this report are identified within the Business Case.



7. Legal implications

There will be legal implications for all the District Authorities and the County Council, whatever the Government's final decision is in relation to county of Somerset. These will need to be considered once the Government's decision is known.

8. Council Plan Implications

Direct and indirect impact on all Corporate Priorities.

9. Climate Change Implications

The climate change implications of this report are identified within the Business Case.

10. Equality and Diversity Implications

An initial equalities impact Assessment has been completed. There are no implications attendant on production of the business case, but we anticipate more as we move into implementation stage. A detail assessment will be carried out and implications monitored throughout the next phase of the programme.

11. Privacy Impact Assessment

There are no data privacy implications arising from this report.

12. Background Papers

1. Stronger Somerset Business Case
2. Stronger Somerset Executive Summary
3. <https://www.strongersomerset.co.uk> microsite

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