

SWT Scrutiny Committee - 9 September 2020

Present: Councillor Gwil Wren (Chair)

Councillors Libby Lisgo, Sue Buller, Ed Firmin, John Hunt, Dave Mansell, Nick Thwaites, Simon Coles, Caroline Ellis and Loretta Whetlor

Officers: Alison North, James Hassett, Dawn Adey and Amy Tregellas

Also Present: Councillors Benet Allen, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Andrew Sully and Anthony Trollope-Bellew

(The meeting commenced at 6.15 pm)

37. Apologies

Apologies were received from:- Councillors Aldridge, Stone, Wheatley and D Wedderkopp.

The following attended as substitutes:- Councillors Ellis, Whetlor and Coles.

38. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Ellis	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Hunt	All Items	SCC & Bishop's Hull	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Mansell	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Perry	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Whetlor	All Items	Watchet	Personal	Spoke and Voted

An Additional personal interest was declared by Councillors Ellis, Firmin, Hunt, Lisgo, Thwaites Whetlor and Wren as moderators of a One Somerset Facebook Group.

39. **Public Participation - To receive only in relation to the business for which the Extraordinary Meeting has been called any questions, statements or petitions from the public in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 14,15 and 16**

The following Public submission was received by Mr Mann relating to the Stronger Somerset Business Case:-

Your council claims a cultural affinity with Sedgemoor but you would maintain separate identities in a Somerset West unitary. Could you explain this please and also the opportunity to design a new service with three levels, including a Somerset wide level?

Why would two Unitary Councils halt the brain drain and drive reform and productivity better than one unitary?

The One Somerset business case claims implementation costs of £16.5m for one unitary and £18.5m for two. It also claims £52.6m in 5 year savings for one unitary and £16.1m for two Unitary Councils.

The Stronger Somerset business case claims implementation costs of £12.8m for one unitary and £13.8m for two. It also claims £84m in 5 year direct benefits for one unitary and £74.4m for two Unitary Councils.

In addition to two management teams and over 200 councillors, two Unitary Councils would each need the many managers and staff to provide the complex social and children's care services, health services, education and families services, roads and transport. Indeed 66% of my very expensive council tax is paid to Somerset County Council and 10% is to your council, reflecting the variety of roles that would have to be duplicated. Can you comment on this please and your claimed similarity of 5 year direct benefits between one unitary Somerset and two?

40. **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan be noted.

41. **Full Council Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Full Council Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Full Council Forward Plan be noted.

42. **Executive Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Executive Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Executive Forward Plan be noted.

43. **Stronger Somerset Business Case**

The report was introduced by The Leader of the Council and presented by The Chief Executive.

Members were reminded that the Leader of Somerset County Council stated that he wished to pursue the option of a single Unitary Council for Somerset. The position had 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 had been submitted to the Secretary of State.

Members were also reminded 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.

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.

This report presented the Business Case for the Scrutiny Committee to consider ahead of it being presented to Full Council for consideration.

The report outlined 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 was detailed in the Stronger Somerset Business Case and summarised in the Executive Summary. It had been prepared for the purposes of submission to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in September 2020.

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 had been exploring together the best way to address the challenges, and, under the banner of FoLGiS (Future of Local Government in Somerset) commissioned research into the options for the future. The aim had not been to simply cut costs, the intention had been to find a way, through the better use of

resources, to sustain vital services now and for the future whilst also dealing with some of the big challenges faced by Somerset and its communities.

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, the conclusion was made that change needed to happen to ensure the best for the communities of Somerset and for local government to be financially sustainable

During the debate the following points were made:-

- Previous West Somerset District Councillors expressed views that they had been forgotten by the new District Council with everything Taunton Centric. The Unitary case enhanced these fears for rural areas of the current district.
- Significant praise has been received from residents in West Somerset with recent works on Seaward Way and the Harbour Wall in Watchet.
- Local Community Networks led by elected Unitary Councillors with Parish Councils having the opportunity to take on the provision of local services. How does Stronger Somerset help parishes take on the requirement? Partnership working with town Councils would be weighed up with the finances around this, it was recognised that it was also the case the some Parish Councils did not want to take on additional services.
- Stronger Somerset has double the amount of elected members. With 5k population per elected Councillors which was considered low.
- Concerns were expressed over the two unitary model and the costs of administering this would lead to a creation of one Unitary in the future.
- In the future the model put forward would be beyond the minimum size of 300k population. The model has been created for the benefit of residents and effective public services and not about party politics.
- Concerns were expressed of the timing as the new Somerset West and Taunton Council Established itself. There were reservations over the One Somerset option. Further details of the Stronger Somerset model in the coming weeks was anticipated.
- Which services would continue to be provided Countywide under the new model? Offloading of services previously had left Parish Councils feeling like they are paying additionally for those services.
- District Councils helping Parishes with the neighbourhood plan and adding these to the local plan was encouraged.
- Setting up a Children's Trust and Social care details were still being worked through with details to follow. These decisions would be the responsibility of the Shadow Authority.
- Procurement savings and making these with economies of scale would be considered with other partners, the right solutions would be found involving partners to provide good quality and improved services.
- Concerns were expressed over the timescales of creating the new Council.
- SALC were willing to have conversations with district and Parish Councils over the proposal.
- Provision of transport was questioned in the new model. Further details were to follow once engagement had been completed with partners.

- White papers due relating to Devolution and Planning were expected to provide further details of further local government reform.
- Further details were requested in relation to levelling up on education and social mobility. Education and employment opportunities were needed, attracting a mixture of skills for the area was required.
- Recommendations to focus on specific recommendations to level up were required. Partnership working to focus on education was required, different aspects were required to ensure further details on Education provision were included.
- Focus on the governance of the New Council, giving all Councillors a democratic voice and involve all Councillors.
- Concerns were expressed over Children's Services being transferred into a children's trust. Accountability of these services out of democratic control was a specific concern and commitment to this was cautioned. Changes were possible for all services within the next 18 months.
- The sovereign Council would make decisions around how services would be formed and provided.
- The Stronger Somerset case and details around, further concerns were expressed in relation to inconsistencies around collaboration and remaining the same. Moving Children's Services to an undemocratic body would have no definite benefit on the service provision. Some ideas and intentions for services were not clear in the business case. Aspirations around a Town Council for Taunton were questioned along with resourcing this. SWT had not made progress on the creation of the Town Council since its formation.
- Concerns were raised in signing off a blank cheque where further details were needed of how savings would be generated. The creation of SWT and savings envisioned would be a warning to all Councils how not to approach future reorganisation.
- There was still the aspiration in the Stronger Somerset business case in setting up a Town Council.
- Living Well was a reflection of how services were provided through learning from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Addressing Adults social care financing was required along with the rural and ageing demographic.
- The creation of the West of England Combined Authority was considered a potential opportunity following the publishing of the devolution white paper in the coming months.
- The risk of parish councils raising their precept to provide additional services was considered.
- Addressing the Adult Social Care budget gap was discussed.
- The name Stronger Somerset was agreed by all District Leaders and Chief Executives.
- It was acknowledged there would be a period of turmoil over the next 18 months whichever option was decided by central government.
- Trusts offer a better alternative than One Somerset, both Councils would decide to create the trusts.
- The Secretary of State's decision was still to be determined with a Shadow Authority due to be created in April.
- Stronger Somerset was considered in support of providing closer links with Parish Councils. All members were in agreement that whatever the outcome all Councils would need to work together closely once the Shadow Council had been created.
- Increases of Parish precepts and these getting capped if undertaking additional services were considered.

- Risks of the increasing age profile in some areas were discussed alongside the need to attract a younger profile residents and investing in connectivity for the more remote areas.
- The creation and makeup of the Shadow Authority were considered. Safeguarding social assets such as Council Houses should be prevented. The greater democratic representation would be higher in the creation of two Parishes instead of one, proposed numbers for Councillors in the Stronger Somerset business case were requested.
- A stronger emphasis of public health was suggested in the business case. Longer term benefits would be gained if this was prioritised. Improvement to bus services and wellbeing of residents was encouraged.
- The work on the stronger Somerset was commended and officers were thanked for their hard work.
- Commended on emphasising on working together and commit to continuing attitudes of respect to Councillors in other authorities.
- Clarification was given that Unitary was not presented as a forgone conclusion in previous reorganisations.
- The definition minor amendments in the recommendation was questions, cllrs requested sighting on any minor amendments that are made. Reassurance was provided that this was aimed at the smaller changes around grammar and spelling.

In summary the Scrutiny Chair made a broad recognition that the business case was aimed at the minister but fully acknowledged further details would be needed quickly in advance of setting up the shadow authority. The following comments were also made:-

- Future services provided by any new Council would need to reform and improvements and the benefit of the community, specific concerns were recognised over the creation of a Children's Trust and the challenges around this.
- The devolution of Parish Councils and questions around services that could be devolved needed further investigation, there were differing views over the appetite of parish Councils to do this at the risk of increasing their precept and the potential of this leading to a future cap.
- Employee retention would also be a priority with high calibre staff needing to be retained as part of the reorganisation. Prioritising the creation of Taunton Town Council to ensure appropriate democratic representation was required. There was a risk that the creation of a new Council could provide a further impediment to the creation of a Taunton Town Council, further information around ongoing devolution and further changes in implementing reform was expected from Central Government white paper within the next month.
- The New Council would need to develop and ensure the appropriate infrastructure in place to apply for grants to promote growth, innovation and the economy to tap into funding, along with providing the tools and development to employees in delivering a top quality service in the creation of the Shadow leading into the standing up of the new authority.
- Future local government reform would need to place emphasis on preventing further disruption to services whilst embracing the opportunity to bring in talent and investment into the local economy and Increase attractiveness of the area and Levelling up Education and Employment provision.
- The Stronger Somerset Business Case ensured a larger number elected members representing communities and parishes to ensure the best outcomes for the residents of Somerset.

A recorded vote was taken for the recommendations below:-

Councillor		Apologies		For	Against	Abstain
Cllr Sue Buller				Y		
Cllr Norman Cavill						Y
Cllr Simon Coles				Y		
Cllr Dixie Darch				Y		
Cllr Caroline Ellis				Y		
Cllr Habib Farbahi				Y		
Cllr Ed Firmin				Y		
Cllr John Hunt				Y		
Cllr Libby Lisgo				Y		
Cllr David Mansell	Absent for the vote					
Cllr Derek Perry				Y		
Cllr Nicholas Thwaites				Y		
Cllr Danny Wedderkopp	Apologies					
Cllr Loretta Whetlor				Y		
Cllr Gwil Wren				Y		
Total				12		1
Total for voting				13		

Scrutiny Committee Recommended to:

a. Endorse the Business Case for the reform of local government including the creation of two 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 Somerset West and Taunton, the Council will continue to work with colleagues across all tiers of local government and public service in Somerset.

(The Meeting ended at 9.09 pm)

