

SHEPTON MALLET TOWN COUNCIL

Meeting	Full Council, Item 9.12
Date	8 th September 2020
Author	Cllr. Garfield Kennedy
Subject	Local Government reorganisation in Somerset

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform Councillors on the One Somerset Proposal

Report by Local Government Working Party prepared on 1st September 2020

2.0 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN SOMERSET

Somerset County Council now wishes to abolish itself along with the four district councils in its geographic area including Mendip to create one single local authority for Somerset.

It was announced last week that the Conservative Government has informed all 4 of the district councils that there is now no alternative other than to accept that Unitary local government is going to happen in Somerset. However there has been no public debate or consultation. Whatever happens, all this is being rushed through in the next six months or so. It means that the future of local government in Somerset will be decided with little or no provision for public involvement.

The government has also indicated that it will use Somerset as a test case, with the formation of a Unitary authority (or Unitary authorities) followed by another reorganisation later incorporating sub regional Mayors (such as Manchester or the West Midlands). It is noteworthy that politically that this would be more advantageous to the current Westminster government.

The four existing district councils share one certainty: they will b

abolished. There are two likely outcomes (although variants of these could emerge in the coming weeks and months):

Somerset County Council's ONE SOMERSET plan

The recent "Future of Local Government in Somerset" report, suggested that Somerset was failing in a number of policy areas. While some of these are either shared with the County Council or are solely the responsibility of the district councils, 14 out of 15 of these highlighted areas of failure are either wholly the responsibility of Somerset County Council or in 4 instances shared with the district authorities. See below:

1. **Social Mobility** – Somerset County Council
2. **Poverty and Deprivation** – Somerset County Council & District Councils

3. **Troubled Families** – Somerset County Council
4. **Low Wage/Low Skill** – Somerset County Council & District Councils
5. **Low Productivity** – Somerset County Council
6. **Digital Connectivity** - Somerset County Council
7. **Travel** - Somerset County Council
8. **Affordable Housing** – District Councils
9. **Higher Education** - Somerset County Council
10. **Self Harm** - Somerset County Council
11. **Carbon Neutral Councils** - Somerset County Council & District Councils
12. **Carbon Emissions** - Somerset County Council & District Councils
13. **Flooding Increase** - Somerset County Council
14. **Quality of Health** - Somerset County Council
15. **Isolation** - Somerset County Council

The ‘One Somerset’ proposal has been put together during the pandemic using consultants and staff time to produce a glossy 148 page report:

<https://onesomerset.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/OneSomersetBusinessCase.pdf>

This sets out the County Council’s business case. Initially the Leader of the Council claimed there would be a saving of £52.6 million over 5 years, by abolishing all levels of local government bar the parishes and one Unitary body. He has since substantially downgraded his estimate of what the savings may turn out to be.

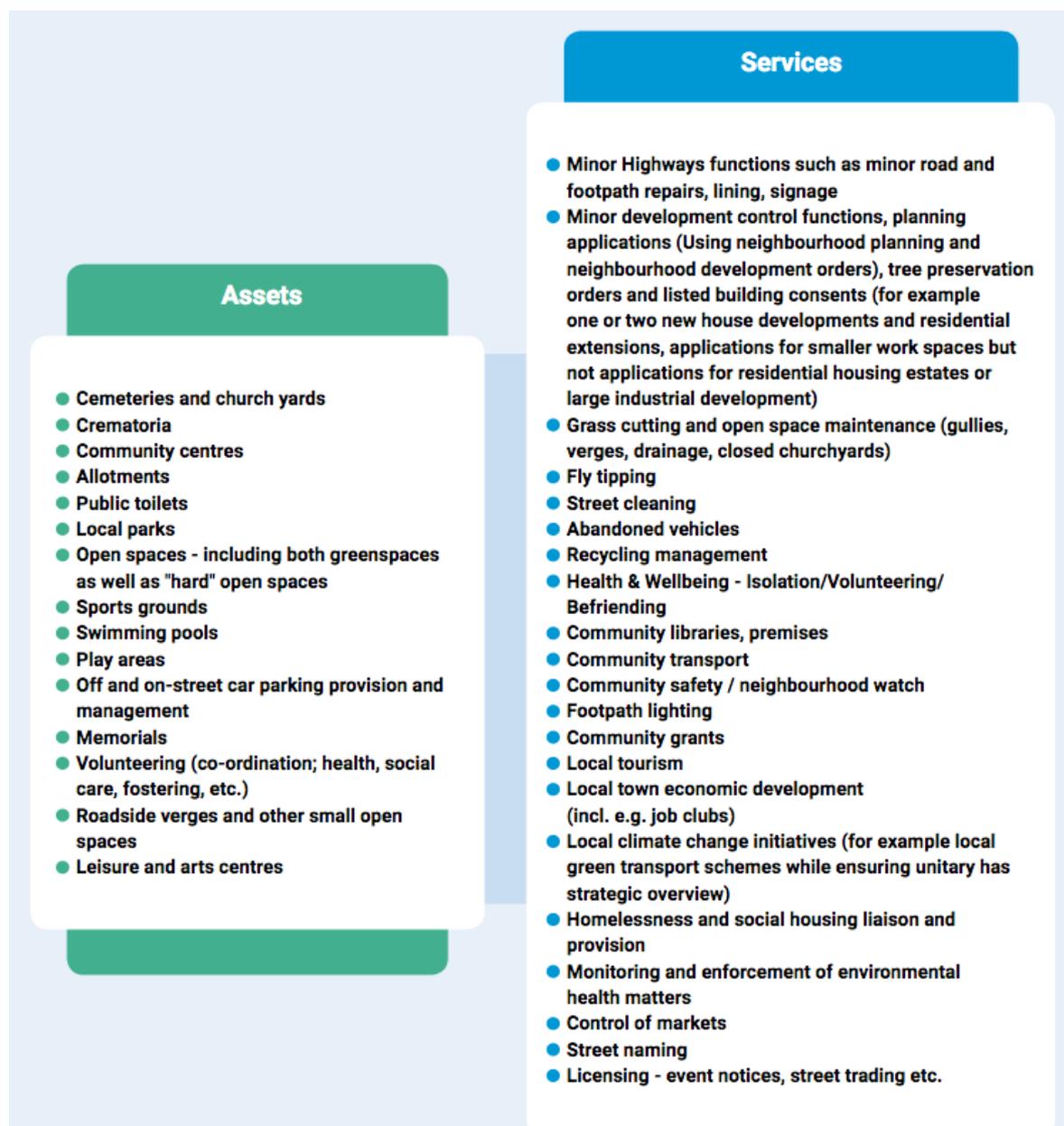
Somerset One wants to cut the number of county wide principled councillors to 100 (from the current total of 269 in County and District authorities), meaning that it is likely 2 councillors will represent Shepton and some rural hinterland in the single tier unitary authority. The District Council’s 2 Unitaries proposal (named “STRONGER SOMERSET”) agrees with reducing councillor representation but by a more modest loss of around a quarter of councillors.

Local Community Networks Area Committees (LCNs) will be established in the One Somerset model. This would be made up of statutory partners. LCN’s would be advisory groups rather than decision making bodies. Geographical areas would be based on “Clinical Commissioning Working Areas”. It is not clear how Town and Parish Councils would be

represented on the LCNs, although the Somerset One business case states Parish Councils could be involved in certain ways.

The LCN boundaries will need to create meaningful units for co-ordination of community and partner organisation activity. A starting point is the Primary Care Networks defined by the Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group. For example in Mendip this is divided into West Mendip, East Mendip (Shepton) and Frome areas.

The One Somerset document floats the possibility of devolving any or all of the following services down to us at parish level:



It is clear that any devolution under the One Somerset proposal will not guarantee the appropriate level of funding, meaning that there could be higher local council tax bills

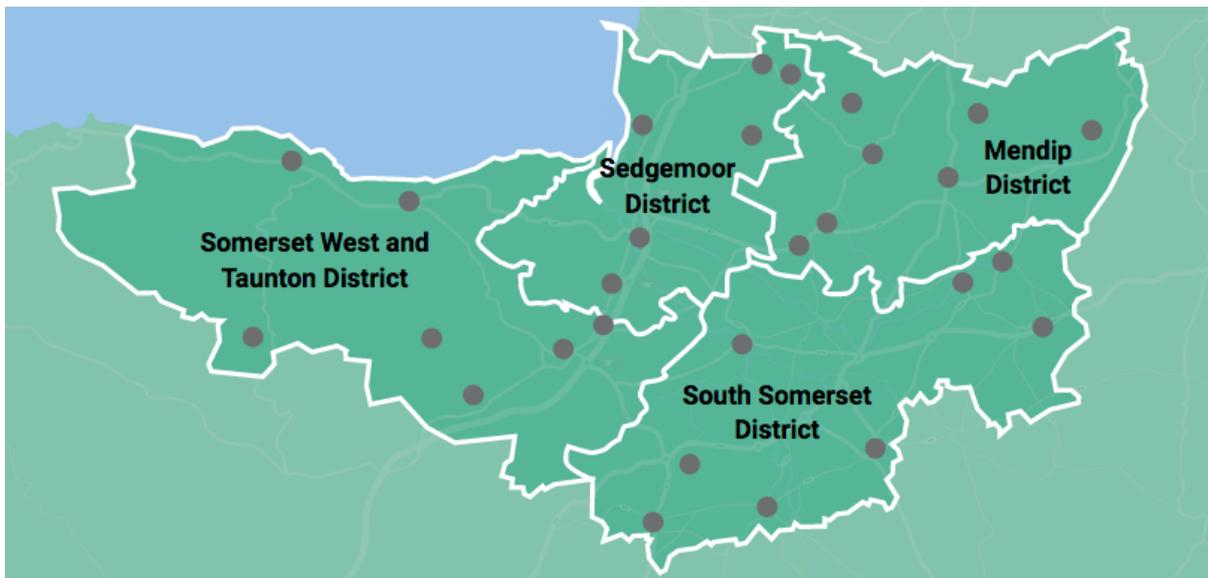
It will be up to individual parishes to decide what, if any of these services they wish to take on. Clearly village and rural parishes would be unlikely to have the experience or staff to take on much, if any, of these new responsibilities. The larger settlements like ourselves would have to carefully consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of increasing our role and the possible costs in providing services locally.

The District Council's STRONGER SOMERSET (2 UNITARIES) plan

Mendip, along with the three other district authorities, have produced a 100 page document released on 26th August:

<https://www.strongersomerset.co.uk/files/business-case.pdf>

Again using consultants this proposes the creation of two Unitary authorities splitting the county into a West Somerset Unitary (with Somerset West and Taunton District + Sedgemoor District defining the geography of one new Unitary area) and an East Somerset Unitary (encompassing Mendip + South Somerset District areas defining the second Unitary area).



This is in contrast to the County Council's "One Somerset" plan. Instead of a single body stretching services from Porlock in the West to Frome in the East (a car journey of about two and a half hours at the best of times) we would still have two levels of local government: ourselves as the Town Council, and an enlarged but more logical and contained Unitary authority joining Mendip in the north to South Somerset.

The 4 existing District Councils make the case that one large Unitary Authority will not deliver the savings the Government require; nor, they say, will it deliver the improvement to services that Somerset County Council claim and Somerset residents should expect.

The District Councils in their "Stronger Somerset" document have made this counter proposal:

“The creation of 2 more logical and more accountable Unitary Authorities on either side of the M5 corridor. It will mean that Mendip District Council and South Somerset District Council will work together to form a single authority. This can achieve both financial savings and the improvements to services that can best serve our communities.”

Here again, there may be an offer to devolve certain services down to parish level and we need to be mindful of the challenges that this entails.

The “Stronger Somerset” proposes a less draconian reduction in councillor representation to 100 councillors per Unitary authority (effectively losing approximately a quarter of the existing sitting councillors), but would allow the electoral commission to advise on numbers before a final decision is taken. It also proposes a partially devolved model of “Area Working Community Networks”.

The language used in the 4 districts’ “Stronger Somerset” report implies a greater involvement at a more local level. Their plan seems to accept certain principles set out by the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC):

“Setting out rights and responsibilities, expectations and new possibilities and ways of working between the Unitary authority and parish and town councils.

This would be a living and binding document: Parish and town councils would be involved in determining the methodology behind the devolution of assets and application of the principle of devolution “by request”, recognising the diversity of the wide and varied levels of capability.

The Unitary and parish and town councils would be encouraged to commission a “Somerset Guide to Localism” including good examples, outcomes and meaningful partnerships.

Parish and town councils would be involved in establishing the boundaries, brief, representation and procedures of LCNs from day one. LCNs to have dedicated and supported senior staff presence based locally.”

However it is unclear how this would be achieved to ensure there was equity of all sizes of Parish or Town Councils.

“To build trust, a five-year joint cultural and development programme for staff and members would be established. A team drawn from local government, partners and a suitable University should create a road map showing possibilities for greater engagement, localism, resilience and innovative solutions.

Parish and town councils need to run a campaign to ensure that their voices are heard loud and clear in the run up to, implementation and subsequent working of the new Unitary council.”

The impacts on Town, City and Parish Councils

Much remains uncertain but the promise of devolving services and responsibilities to the lowest level of local government on the face of it may sound attractive, but it can only work if the money to finance, service and appoint additional staff to manage these responsibilities follows. Alternatively, if services get handed down (or more likely trickle down - i.e. dropped by higher levels of local government but lacking the finance to pay for them), additional money must be found to run these newly-acquired devolved elements.

We know that in nearby Wiltshire (now a Unitary authority) responsibilities for Town Councils increased and much of the costs had to be found from increasing their precepts. Despite public promises at the initial stages of setting the Unitary authority up, sufficient levels of finance failed to follow. As a result, precepts in comparable-sized communities in Wiltshire are currently appreciably higher than they are in Somerset.

There are additional pitfalls in taking on additional services: the larger settlements (like ourselves, Wells, Frome, Glastonbury and Street in Mendip) may well end up having no choice but to increase our precepts to carry extra responsibilities. However we serve a hinterland of smaller village and rural parishes who use our facilities for shopping, leisure, doctors, dentists, events, the arts and other services where the facilities we provide will be paid for by only Shepton residents.

In the “Stronger Somerset” proposal there is talk of clustering parishes for service delivery. However, if Parish Clerks do not have the “General Power of Competence”, legally they cannot spend money in another parish)

Smaller parishes would have no motivation to increase their precepts. Where now they pay Somerset and Mendip Councils in their council tax bills for many of these services, unless the new Unitary authority hands us down sufficient extra funding, in future we would be paying for these same services loaded onto our town precept. The villages and rural areas would no longer be making a contribution to support services they rely on just as much as the ratepayers in the larger settlements where they shop and rely on for many essentials.

In conclusion

Shepton has little in common with Chard in the south or Watchet in the West, so we conclude that both of Unitary proposals do not really serve Shepton well. However we have to accept that matters are out of our hands since the Westminster Government has indicated they are determined to remodel local government in rural Britain.

In the “One Somerset” and ‘Stronger Somerset’ documents, it appears that both the County and District Councils’ speculate that they will make broadly similar financial savings from the formation of Unitary authorities. We know that the proposed savings in previous Unitary launches elsewhere have not produced the level of savings initially claimed by outgoing authorities.

The reduction of local councillors from 269 to 100 in the One Somerset plan is a very substantial change. We will see poorer and more remote representation and the return to a bias for more affluent professional or retired councillors to take up near full time but quite poorly remunerated posts. We see this as undermining the principles of representative committees drawn from a cross-section of citizens of different backgrounds, skillsets, ages and diversity.

It is also noteworthy that both of these Unitary bids will use the Cabinet model, with either Local Community Networks or Community Networks offering a degree of local area working. The small inner circle Cabinet will make all the decisions whilst Area Working Networks will be restricted to a toothless advisory rôle.

WE feel that the government are making a mistake by using the existing Somerset County Council boundary as a given in imposing a Unitary solution on our area. This has limited the opportunities to create more logical geographical Unitaries.

Shepton looks to the north with stronger connections for work, commuting and services to Bath and Bristol, rather than to the existing South Somerset District. We believe that a West-East split in the “Stronger Somerset” model, to create two Unitaries within the existing boundary of the present Somerset County Council, may be the best we can hope for at this stage.

We know that further changes are likely to come to local government, such that around 80 large mayoral regions will be created covering the whole of England. If this is (again) imposed by Westminster, it would create one new Council and allow Shepton and Frome to join the area covered by the existing Bath and North East Somerset Council (BANES).

We all want to see the services delivered that people need to have decent, safe and prosperous lives. We want to ensure they are funded equitably and transparently and stay within local reach and remain accessible. For this reason, we recommend that due consideration should be given to taking on responsibilities where we feel there will be a democratic deficit (i.e. control would come from too far away) or where we can demonstrate that we can manage tasks and service provision better than a Unitary authority to best serve our residents, or finally, where we are convinced we can provide services more efficiently and at less cost to ratepayers.
