

Review of “Stronger Somerset” Proposals for Place Services

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1. The Brief

- 1.1 To produce a short, independent report from an expert that critiques the Place Service aspects of Somerset District Councils unitary proposal, ‘Stronger Somerset’. The proposal is to replace the current two-tier council arrangements in April 2023 with two new unitary councils, a shared support services company, an alternative delivery vehicle for children’s services and a combined authority for the two-tier part of the county.

In particular, the report should assess the proposal’s approach to the provision of Place Services, including any associated risks, whether any opportunities have been missed, and whether there are issues that have not been considered and addressed.

For the purposes of this report ‘Place Services’ have been defined as broadly covering:

- Planning Services – including local plans, development management, land charges enforcement etc
- Environmental Services – including waste disposal & collection, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, countryside management & public rights of way, public open space & grounds maintenance, flood & water management, heritage, environmental health, trading standards, sustainability & zero carbon.
- Transportation – including transport policy, road, rail, active travel, community transport, and client transport/home to school transport
- Highways – including highways asset management & reactive/planned maintenance, street works & cleansing services, highways development management, public realm.
- Economic Development – including economic policy & insight, regeneration initiatives, town centre management, digital infrastructure, inward investment, business support, skills development.
- Property Assets – including facilities management, asset strategy & management, agricultural land holdings.

- Projects – major capital projects, external funding bids, digital infrastructure, major growth & new settlements.
- County Partnerships – including the Somerset Joint Civil Contingencies Partnership and the Somerset Rivers Authority.
- Sub-National/Regional Collaboration - with organisations such as The Heart of the South West LEP, Peninsula Transport, Connecting Devon & Somerset, and the neighbouring West of England Combined Authority.

2. **My Credentials**

- 2.1 I am an independent strategic advisor & facilitator to the public and private sector bringing over 25 years of senior executive experience at board level, embracing vision & strategy development, partnership development, change management & delivery, innovation and organisational development.

I have led and managed all aspects of place service delivery at County and District levels, my last substantive post in local government being Executive Director (Transport, Economy & Environment) with Buckinghamshire County Council, stepping down on 31 March 2020, as the new unitary Buckinghamshire Council came into being.

As a prominent Place thought leader, and former President of the Association of the Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transportation (ADEPT), I continue to advise the public and private sectors on strategies that will improve collaboration and drive better economic, environmental and community outcomes nationally and locally. I remain an active associate member of ADEPT, currently facilitating the ADEPT/Amey Excellence in Place Leadership Programme and Chairing the joint ADEPT/Private Sector Commissioning Board for its £23m Live Lab Programme. I am a Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Highways & Transportation (CIHT).

3. **The Stronger Somerset Proposal**

- 3.1 The Stronger Somerset report considered 4 options (Options A-D). The Somerset District Council's preferred option is Option C, to replace the current two-tier local government arrangements in Somerset of a county council and 4 district councils with:

- Western Somerset Unitary Council covering the administrative areas of the existing Sedgemoor and Somerset West & Taunton District Councils which in 2021 have a combined population of 282,000.
- Eastern Somerset Unitary Council covering the administrative areas of the existing South Somerset & Mendip District Councils which in 2021 have a combined population of 287,000.
- A Combined Authority with the 2 new unitary Councils as its core.
- County-wide merged joint services such Shared Enabling Service providing business capability and the retained Somerset Waste Partnership, including a new county-wide alternative delivery model for Children's Services.
- A neighbourhood or local community area-based approach to care commissioning and service delivery.
- Potential to devolve additional services and assets to City, Town & Parish Councils

4. **General Observations of the Proposal**

- 4.1 Overall, the proposal is heavy on ambition and method for reform, but light on service delivery detail, evidence and impact. There are no significant references to how existing place services are currently delivered, what will change and how they will be delivered from 2023.

The proposal is critical of the current public service model in Somerset. In Section 2.3 it identifies 7 system drivers for change and concludes that currently there is a historic lack of strategic leadership and collaboration across Somerset, leading to weak financial resilience and inefficiencies, short term approaches, a lack of local responsiveness, poor service quality and limited trust.

There is very little detail or evidence with this diagnosis. The undertone is that the County Council is culpable for many of these system failures. There is passing reference to longstanding concerns about County SEND and Children's Services, unresponsive county services remote from communities, and inefficient two-tier services linked to growth and the quality of life. The assumption might be that this is referring to place based services across all the Councils, but this is unclear. There is no data or evidence substantiating these claims.

The proposal advocates a new system led approach to service delivery through the new unitaries that will deliver better outcomes. In Section 2.4 the

proposal identifies 13 'reform objectives' that the new system needs to address to create better outcomes for Somerset. There is a short high-level description for each reform objective. These are then grouped under 4 'Reform Priority' areas – People, Community, Connectivity & Growth. Place services will impact to some degree on nearly all 13 reform objectives, although the key references to planning, economy, environment and infrastructure sit within Reform Priority 4: Growth.

In Section 2.5 more overall programme objectives are detailed, with 4 high level objectives and 19 programme objectives. The reform objectives are assimilated within the longer list of programme objectives.

This is an impressive list of objectives, and they are the key issues that many Councils in England are tackling. However, there is no clear evidenced rationale in the proposal for their identification, no baseline data/facts underpinning their current status, nor any tangible indications of what better might look like as a consequence of the reforms proposed.

There is no suggestion that the current DCs already adopt this system led approach – individually or collectively – and have the track record of expertise, experience and benefits to prove this approach when scaled up across all Somerset's local authority services, or that they will deliver the proposed financial and community benefits.

Arguably there are too many actual and classification of objectives, and the grouping of objectives gets confused. It is difficult to see a consistent and simple 'golden thread' of intent from the 4 high level vision ambitions, through the various reform objectives to the high-level proposals for change.

To achieve these complex ambitions the broad suite of Place Services operating across the proposed system must be clear. The impact and seamless performance of the reconfigured Place Services will be instrumental in achieving many of these ambitions. This clarity and re-assurance are not provided in the proposal.

5. **The Proposed Operating Model - Place Services**

- 5.1 The overall operating model proposed is discussed in Section 4.2.1 of the proposal. A fresh start to all service delivery is proposed with service design to be tested against six system design principles - a method to be used by both new Unitaries - although they will have their own transformation programmes. It is not clear whether the District Councils already adopt this

approach with their current Place Services, giving them proven track record of expertise and benefits.

There is no clear proposition for Place Services yet articulated in the proposal. Nonetheless, there are some clues as to how Place Services might operate at three different structural levels/tiers of operation: Somerset Combined Authority and County-wide shared service level; Unitary Council level; and City/Town/Parish or Neighbourhood level. Clues include:

At Somerset-wide Level:

- The proposed Combined Authority which would front a devolution deal with offers and asks, take responsibility for sub-regional planning including strategic sites and infrastructure, host an infrastructure investment fund, and set economic strategy and delivery programmes.
- The existing Somerset Waste Partnership
- Carbon zero, climate resilience and energy self-sufficiency

At Unitary Level:

- Prepare development plans
- Directly deliver Local authority-led regeneration and Housing Revenue Account schemes

At City, Town, Parish & Neighbourhood Level:

- Place based neighbourhood service hubs which whilst focussing on community based social care provision, envisage closer working with economic prosperity, housing and environmental services, although the practical implications of this are not articulated.
- A spectrum of devolved service and partnership agreements with City, Town & Parish Councils in illustrative areas such as car parks, libraries, digital infrastructure, sustainable growth initiatives, assets, and community development.

Although the detailed operating model for Place Services has yet to be undertaken by the District Councils, this embryonic three-tier approach will retain similar levels of governance complexity, and to some degree cost, that already exist in the current model of local government in Somerset. It isn't clear in the proposal where the 'guiding mind' is for this 3-tier ecosystem for place services and delivery, whether all governance costs have been included within the proposal's financials, and where clear accountabilities will sit.

There are other key existing county-wide place services and partnerships that have not been referred to in the proposal, with no detailed explanation of where they would fit in this new three-tier approach:

- Transport in its broadest sense – client transport and home to school transport, transport policy/local transport planning, incl. rail, innovation in sustainable transport and mobility.
- The retention or abolition of the Somerset Growth Board and its Growth Plan which brings together the Councils, Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), business and further education, and if retained, its relationship with the proposed Combined Authority.
- Highways asset management and maintenance and future of the Skanska contract (that runs to 2024).
- Strategic Flood Management responsibility and the future of the Somerset Rivers Authority.
- Emergency/resilience planning and the future of the Somerset Local Authority Civil Contingencies Partnership.
- Joint trading standards service with Devon, Torbay (and very soon, Plymouth) which is hosted by Devon County Council.
- Registration services provided by the County Council for North Somerset Council.

The devolution to City, Town & Parishes could be significant for place service delivery. Whilst it is acknowledged that the conversation with the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) has yet to shape the proposition, local devolution successes around the country have included aspects of highways maintenance, street scene, waste and environmental services. None of these have been used as positive examples in the proposal.

6. **The Proposed Operating Model – Combined Authority**

- 6.1 Reform Priority 4: Growth gives some insight into how the proposed new unitary councils intend to 'level up' the Somerset economy by improving productivity and social mobility. The proposed way forward is 'significantly boosted' by a new Combined Authority (CA) and an ambitious devolution deal. The precise configuration of the CA would follow the creation of the new unitaries.

The Somerset CA would comprise the two new unitaries who would look at options to 'include our close neighbours'. The devolution deal has 7 themes:

- Business & productivity
- Carbon neutrality and climate resilience
- Digital connectivity
- Transport infrastructure and connectivity
- Skills and social mobility
- Thriving places
- Sustainable housing

The proposition is that a devolution deal based on these themes, with associated powers and funding, would enable the CA to tackle the climate crisis, drive up economic productivity, 'level up' Somerset, and enable it to become a net contributor to national GDP with 'reduced reliance' on Government.

The CA proposal is very high level and lacks enough detail to take a view on how it would, or could, deliver its stated ambitions. Compromised of the two new unitary councils alone it would make it the smallest CA in the UK with a population of c570,00, although it does allude to the potential of close neighbours being part. Bath & NE Somerset Unitary are already established members of the West of England CA (WECA) and North Somerset have been trying for some time to become a WECA member. Together they form part of the Bristol Sub-region. The alternative benefits either would get from leaving WECA and joining a speculative Somerset CA have not been articulated. Neither to date have publicly intimated their support for this proposal, and indeed both councils did receive the initial invitation from the Secretary of State to be involved in Somerset LGR, but both have declined through votes by their full Councils.

The Somerset CA proposal, in seeking a devolution deal covering economic and infrastructure growth, has not clearly explained how it will practically work with existing government sponsored sub-regional bodies with similar responsibilities already operating across the proposed CA geography:

- The Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership, (which covers the 2 tier authorities in Somerset and all the authorities in Devon), although the proposal (pg. 129) maintains the new unitary boundaries are co-terminus with the LEP. The County Council is currently the accountable body for the LEP, which hasn't been acknowledged.

- Peninsula Transport (the sub-national transport body covering the whole of the SW peninsula minus the North and Bath & NE Somerset Unitaries, who are members of the Western Gateway SNTB) provides a stronger voice to secure connectivity improvements in Somerset.
- The Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) programme, which is commissioning and managing digital delivery.

Options might include giving the Somerset CA their current responsibilities, or some kind of commissioning relationship between the CA and these bodies for activity in their patch. Either way these require governance negotiations that hold no guarantee of success and would likely result in additional complexity, complicated accountabilities and cost.

More fundamentally Reform Priority 4 says virtually nothing about what the 2 new unitaries will do to address the social, economic and environmental challenges without a CA and devolution deal. There is passing reference to unitary government helping 'us address our economic challenges more effectively' but there is no detail on what more effectively actually means? Nor does the proposal explain what their approach would be if a CA is not agreed. No option appraisal of alternatives to a CA would appear to have been carried out.

7. **The Risks to Place Services**

- 7.1 The proposal is ambitious in its approach, and as one might expect from an advocacy document, it makes sweeping assumptions with a significant lack of detail and evidence underpinning it. In places it is almost naive in the simplicity of its proposition, perhaps underpinned by either a lack of understanding, or perhaps an attempt to smooth over the actual complexity of what is proposed? Either way, the ambition is exposed to significant risk of delivery and benefits realisation.

The proposal has undertaken a risk assessment of its programme and the 7 highest rated risks presented in the report, although 2 are the same, so 6. There are other significant risks that are not either considered high enough impact or may not have been considered:

- Impact on county-wide place service contracts hasn't been addressed such as the:
 - Skanska highways contract
 - Streetlighting and traffic signals contract
 - Heritage Trust

- NSL parking contract
- WSP engineering services contract
- TDA Enterprise Centre management and business support contract
- Bus service contracts
- City, Town and Parish Councils do not want to fully participate in the various local devolution opportunities leading to a myriad of unitary and local council delivery solutions.
- A broad-based Combined Authority proposal lacks support from neighbours leaving the 2 unitaries to create a small CA on the current County Council boundaries, reducing the strength of its voice regionally and nationally.
- No deal and funding package is agreed with Government, with no obvious Plan B for driving the proposed economic, social and environmental ambitions through existing resources.
- Go live in just over 2 years for this proposal is tight, what aspects would have to move to the right for post-go live implementation if slippage?
- The system led approach to place service reform across both unitaries don't deliver the scale of on-going base revenue savings proposed.
- No disaggregation costs (revenue and capital) included for splitting up large county services and associated contracts, some of which are referred to above.
- Potential loss of strategic capability due to staff turnover/departure linked to the changes, weakening the ability to mobilise, transition and then transform this ambitious change agenda.

8. **Summary**

8.1 From a Place Service perspective, the Stronger Somerset proposal can be summarised as:

- Broad brush, with no real detail on how Place services will work across the two unitaries.
- The method for place service reform that will underpin cost reductions and service improvements is articulated but with no baseline, targets or what better looks like described.
- Being silent on how key services like highways and transport will be delivered, both integral to the place and stated growth ambitions. The working assumption has to be that these services will be split between the two unitaries, although the Waste Partnership is to be retained.

- An overly complex Place Services solution operating at three different structural levels/tiers of operation: Somerset Combined Authority and County-wide shared service level; Unitary Council level; and City/Town/Parish or Neighbourhood level. No real explanation of where the guiding mind is within this ecosystem with a danger of high governance overhead costs, a lack of transparency and accountability, and sub-optimal delivery.
- Difficult to ascertain whether the broad-brush financials cover all ongoing base costs and hence whether the ongoing revenue baseline reductions can be delivered.
- Significant dependency of growth ambitions on a new Somerset CA and devolution deal, although the proposal is speculative at best, with no detail/targets around ambition, and with no clear statement on how the ambitions would be delivered if a CA and deal is not agreed.
- There are risks to the place operating model delivering its stated objectives, financial savings, and service outcomes that have not been recognised and mitigations proposed.
- It must question the robustness of, and confidence in the delivery of, the proposal upon which to base the future of Place Services in Somerset.

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