



Shepton Mallet Town Council's response to Somerset County Council's Somerset One Project

Shepton Mallet Town Council (SMTC) met on 30th June 2020 to discuss Somerset County Council's One Somerset project that proposes to establish a Unitary Authority across the county with the abolition of the County Council (SCC) and four District Councils.

In many ways we as a town and parish council are the level of local government most in touch with residents. Many residents are baffled by what each of the tiers of local government do, or which authority to turn to for advice or help. The Town Council is often used as the first port of call.

SMTC recognises that there are challenges that face all levels of local councils especially during this pandemic, but there are many underlying problems that predate the current emergency:

Major areas of concern include:

1. The chronic underfunding suffered by all tiers of local government that began with the implementation of austerity measures that started in 2010
2. SCC's funding squeeze that preceded 2010 driven by political choices

Points 1 and 2 have combined to create a looming financial crisis for SCC that are exacerbating problems with service delivery and an inability to address challenges that have become critical including:

3. SCC facing problems funding and resourcing Adult and Children's Social Care.
4. Somerset having chronically poor economic productivity and a failure to address endemic low pay.
5. Affordability of housing: low wages and high house prices combine to make it impossible for many to get on the housing ladder. It results in many born here not being able to find a long-term secure home.
6. The county's poorly insulated housing stock causing fuel poverty.
7. Unreliable and disjointed public transport links and connectivity.
8. No integrated sustainable green plan for Somerset to address climate change.

SMTC believes that local government must serve its residents in an efficient and responsive way. It is vital that any structure of local government does not hinder the delivery of high-quality services. Whilst in parallel, it should never undermine devolved, local, accessible democratic oversight of decision-making.

Does the status quo serve residents well?

We recognize that there are many areas of systemic failure in the current local government arrangements, and at the heart of the problem must lie the approximately 40% of cuts in central funding at the same time as demand for services has grown.

Like many settlements, Shepton Mallet has changed over the previous decade. A sense of the town being moribund and depressed is lifting and in certain ways the town is discovering a new confidence and managing change better than many communities. In large part this is due to new people offering their time and skills and others moving into Shepton with fresh ideas and a vision for the future. This new energy has been helped and at times generated by a supportive and increasingly less political, more ambitious and effective Town Council.

The reduction in Central Government Grant Support in combination with the capping of the higher tier local councils' and their consequent inability to match need to finance has resulted in savage cuts to services or imaginative methods of seeking alternative revenue streams, all in an attempt to balance their accounts.

It is notable that Mendip District Council (MDC) has managed to weather caps and cuts to its revenue with relatively minor impacts on local service provision, mainly by investing in property. At the same time the Town Council has taken on responsibilities in whole or in part from the higher tiers of local government as they make cuts and reduce their capacity in many sectors. These range from provision for youth services, Citizens Advice, Leisure Centre and sport, Library service, the arts, tourism, and infrastructure projects including bridge repairs and road surfacing. Unsurprisingly, Shepton Mallet has had to increase its precept from a very low baseline. Residents now pay significantly more for a greater range of services provided by SMTC.

However, how much these changes in responsibilities are due to the structures of local government or how much this is caused by political decisions made in Somerset or at Westminster is a question brought into sharp focus by SCC's financial challenges and the Somerset One project.

SCC Somerset One Project

It is exceedingly difficult to fully assess the SCC Somerset One bid, as the County Council have yet to produce a detailed business case. Without a comprehensive business case the assertion that significant savings will result and a better service will be forthcoming cannot be rigorously examined or challenged

At face value and at a simplistic level, abolishing five councils and replacing them with one does seem a way to make savings. However, realistically, where will the savings accrue and what will the effects on service provision and devolved local control and accountability be?

Savings that have been highlighted in the Somerset One documentation and website:

1. Loss of four Chief Executives
2. Reduction in the numbers of councillors
3. Ingratiation and more efficient back office corporate support teams
4. Avoiding duplication in Human Resources, Finance, Customer Contact Service, and Legal Services
5. More effective use of property and assets with the release of surplus property and land
6. Rationalising contracts for services like IT

SCC states that the implementation of its Somerset One project will empower towns (including the City of Wells) and parishes to have a greater impact on delivery of local services.

SCC make the claim that these changes will deliver savings of £47 million p.a.* with the cost of the reorganisation to be around £82 million spread over three years. The Leader of Somerset County Council Councillor David Fothergill has committed £1million of public funds to finance and promote SCC's One Somerset Project during the pandemic crisis. This has been a major distraction for all 4 of the affected District Councils and SCC at a particularly challenging time for all tiers of local government.

**It should be noted that Cllr Fothergill, believes a saving of £25 million is more realistic.*

Shepton Mallet Town Council and the history of local government in Somerset

Urban and Rural District Councils were disbanded in 1974 when the current split in upper tier local government arrangements came into effect. Locally, MDC and SCC were granted authority to deliver and run most of our local services. Town and parish councils had (and still have) only minor statutory responsibilities. However, since the implementation of the Localism Act and increasingly during the last 10 years of austerity (including the capping of the revenue raising powers of the upper tiers of local government), SMTC has taken on additional responsibilities. This has been in a range of areas that traditionally parish councils would expect the upper tier authorities to support and pay for.

Economically, Shepton's economy is influenced by the cities of Bath and Bristol to the north, and much less by Taunton and Bridgwater to the south and west. Our specialist health providers are situated in Yeovil and Bath, and to a lesser extent, in Bristol.

The current local government structure has left local residents feeling that Shepton is often forgotten and passed over, with SCC Highways spending disproportionately more in Bridgwater, Taunton, and Yeovil.

Shepton has also had issues with its decades long relationship with Mendip District Council. Many residents in our town believe that having MDC's SHAPE campus here has allowed the District Council to pass over the town's needs and has failed to invest in Shepton.

In recent years, collaboration at officer level has improved substantially, but there remains a sense that regeneration projects in our town have been neglected and there is a long list of poor planning decisions that still blight the town.

Shepton Mallet Town Council's response

We sense an increasing disconnect between those who make decisions at SCC and the people and parishes these decisions directly affect. Decision-making feels remote, applied from on high and receiving little or no scrutiny. We feel we have only been cursorily consulted in a range of recent issues in our area.

When we have managed to secure a higher level of engagement with SCC and its officers it has been with great effort on the part of SMTC (officers and councillors). Yet SCC has a much greater resource than a town or parish. We feel SCC has taken decisions with little sense of the effects they may have at a local level on our residents.

Examples are many and include:

1. The decision to close our library 8 years ago that we managed to overturn by judicial process.
2. Then again there was SCC's plan to move our library to the SHAPE campus that was overturned by sustained work by our councillors, officers and a residents' action group.
3. Road and junction repairs including work to provide a compromise crossing for an infants' school adjacent to a busy main road was imposed on the town.
4. Resistance to complete a safe cycle and pedestrian link under a main road using an existing bridge.
5. We are being forced to find £100,000 from our limited tax base to resurface central parts of town that are owned by SCC Highways.

Arranging appointments or receiving the courtesy of replies from Taunton has been frustrating and taken up disproportionate amounts of our office staff's time and resource. Our concern would be that dealing with other services that may then become the sole responsibility of a thinned down single tier of upper government with £47 million cut from its budget would exacerbate an already highly unsatisfactory working relationship. We fear a too big, too remote, too centralised top down authority by the proposed combining of five service providers into one.

SCC One Somerset claims there would be substantial devolution of local services, and while we would welcome properly resourced devolution, we know from neighbouring counties like Wiltshire that this has simply not happened. Indeed, evidence from elsewhere shows that where services have been shed and passed on down to town and parish councils (all with smaller and very varied tax bases than unitary authorities) the money at sufficient scale to support the devolved services has not followed.

Our recent local experience with SCC and MDC has provided proof that devolution (or shedding) of services comes without funding attached. If SCC's One Somerset bid wishes to save £47 million, it would be naïve for us to accept that income

generation services (such as car parks) will be passed down to local level to help fund local services.

SCC's One Somerset is likely to be a distant and unwieldy administration, even despite distributed outposts away from Taunton.

The District Councils' position

MDC has already started sharing back office support and service provision with Sedgemoor District Council and has a good record of working with other district authorities, both within and outside Somerset, to reduce costs.

Recently MDC adopted its Corporate Plan with one of its key aims to make land available and assign resources to build social housing for local residents. Other initiatives that would keep a strong district presence but at the same time, reduce overheads and costs are in hand.

All of the 4 district councils remain solvent and have taken positive strides in co-operating to increase efficiencies and plan to continue this integration of service provision. Meanwhile SCC has decided to spend £1million to fund a campaign to promote the One Somerset project without a detailed business case so far in evidence. We cannot find any reassurances that power will be divested along with the money needed for us to expand our responsibilities. Also the nature of settlements with sizeable populations and precepts to match versus rural parishes with much smaller precepts makes for a very wide disparity in competency and experience at this lowest tier level of local government.

Somerset's 4 district councils have invested heavily to generate income to offset the government cuts in revenue support grants. They have thus found ways to replace much of the Westminster government's cutbacks and avoided much less draconian cuts that SCC has either been forced or decided to make. This has left the district councils in a stronger financial position.

We cannot know how the economic crisis that inevitably will follow the Covid-19 pandemic will impact these investments. No matter what happens, any authority will inherit these assets or liabilities in any case.

We have concerns about what savings will really emerge from abolishing 4 out of 5 local council administrations. Many residents know their local councillors and they are an essential part of the democratic process. Cutting back on numbers such that there is a single upper tier and a galaxy of parish councils will correspond to a significant increase in workload for each Unitary Councillor that would lead to higher individual allowances and higher special expense rates.

For example, with the present arrangements, the Leader of MDC receives approximately £15,000 p.a. before tax for essentially a full time rôle. When we compare this to a full time minimum wage employee, who receives just over £18,000

p.a., or a District Councillor (without special responsibilities) who receives £4,000 p.a. before tax, these are hardy well-remunerated positions.

Put this another way, in terms of paid employment, this equates to 9 hours per week at minimum wage. County Councillors without special duties receive an allowance of £11,231 p.a. but with no middle tier, their caseload and community leadership demands will explode, or worse, they will become less accessible and remote to residents. The claim that there will be huge savings from councillors' allowances is likely to be either mistaken. There is concern that only the better off pensioners and the idle rich will be able to serve. It will exclude many people in most forms of employment with busy family lives.

In conclusion

There may well be a time for a Unitary Authority. There may be attractive features such as simplifying the services for residents so there is less confusion as to where responsibilities for services reside. But any change of governance from county and district level down to parishes must be conducted on the basis of what benefits this will bring to all the communities served. If it's making cutbacks that is driving the upheaval as opposed to better service for our residents then priorities behind One Somerset are misguided.

We have more than one voice and opinion within our councillors. Some favour a form of Unitary model for Somerset but the consensus in our council is that the time is not right for SCC's Somerset One proposition. There is an overwhelming opinion expressed that our efforts have to be focussed on recovering from the most serious pandemic for over a century, rather than dealing with the diversion of a massive shake-up in local government control.

The recovery from Covid-19 will be hard, it will take an extended period of time and will need our full attention. If anything, the pandemic has shown that the more local the response has been to help our residents, the more effective our efforts have been. During these months of Covid-19, SCC was assigned government resources to reach the vulnerable and those in need of help, but it was the District Council authorities that did much of the on-the-ground work. Parishes responded in a very varied ways ranging from towns like Shepton and villages like Evercreech that quickly mobilised to help, and some elsewhere that simply shut down not knowing what to do, or not having the experience or resource to cope.

SMTC welcomes this opportunity to be a part of the debate on the best route for the long term future of local government - here in Shepton, at Mendip level, and across Somerset and beyond. We feel that SCC's Somerset One bid feels rushed, and badly-timed in the midst of a pandemic when resources and officer time would be better assigned elsewhere.

Beyond this pandemic and when the district councils have a fair chance to put their case, we can see benefit in holding a constitutional convention to explain all the merits and properly worked through plans for devolution and guaranteed fair funding.

We should, and hopefully will, support MDC and SCC to find pathways to improved working in the immediate short term. If it is still felt necessary to explore the Unitary option then this should be examined by a disinterested third party after we have recovered from Covid-19.

The time for change and upheaval may be coming - but just not right now.

One last spanner in the works

If the Westminster Boundary Changes re-emerge (that have yet to be decided), and Shepton was to become part of the Somerset North West Constituency then you may well expect local government boundaries to be coterminous, with implications on the structure of all levels of government including SMTC.