

## South Somerset District Council

Minutes of a Special meeting of the **South Somerset District Council** held on **Thursday 10 September 2020** as a Virtual Meeting using Zoom meeting software.

(6.00 pm - 7.28 pm)

**Present:**

**Members:** Councillor Paul Maxwell (Chairman)  
Councillor Jenny Kenton (Vice-Chairman)

Jason Baker	Mike Hewitson	David Recardo
Robin Bastable	Ben Hodgson	Paul Rowsell
Mike Best	Charlie Hull	Dean Ruddle
Neil Bloomfield	Kaysar Hussain	Gina Seaton
Dave Bulmer	Val Keitch	Peter Seib
Hayward Burt	Andy Kendall	Garry Shortland
Tony Capozzoli	Tim Kerley	Jeny Snell
John Clark	Mike Lewis	Andy Soughton
Nicola Clark	Tony Lock	Mike Stanton
Louise Clarke	Kevin Messenger	Rob Stickland
Nick Colbert	Tricia O'Brien	Lucy Trimnell
Adam Dance	Sue Osborne	Gerard Tucker
Sarah Dyke	Tiffany Osborne	Linda Vijeh
Karl Gill	Robin Pailthorpe	Martin Wale
David Gubbins	Oliver Patrick	Colin Winder
Peter Gubbins	Clare Paul	
Brian Hamilton	Wes Read	

**Officers:**

Alex Parmley	Chief Executive
Martin Woods	Director (Place)
Richard Ward	Monitoring Officer
Nicola Hix	Director (Support Services)
Kirsty Larkins	Director (Strategy and Commissioning)
Jan Gamon	Programme Director, Stronger Somerset
Angela Cox	Specialist (Democratic Services)
Michelle Mainwaring	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Becky Sanders	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Jo Morris	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)
Jo Boucher	Case Officer (Strategy & Commissioning)

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### 164. Apologies for Absence (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Martin Carnell, Malcolm Cavill, Henry Hobhouse, Mike Lock, Pauline Lock, Graham Oakes, Crispin Raikes, Alan Smith and William Wallace.

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## **165. Declarations of Interest (Agenda Item 2)**

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

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## **166. Public Question Time (Agenda Item 3)**

The Council were addressed by a representative of the Somerset Independents Pressure Group. He reminded Council that at their last meeting he had asked them to support a referendum of the people of Somerset on how they were governed. He asked that an additional recommendation be added to the Stronger Somerset Business Case report to include a referendum of the people and a modern committee system which allowed all councillors to take part in decision making. He noted that some Councillors had voiced their support for a referendum but no action had been taken. He felt the report was incorrect to say that a referendum could not take place because of the Coronavirus restrictions as a poll had been conducted when the last unitary bid had taken place in 2007 when 82% of over 200,000 voters rejected that proposal. He said that Civica were able to conduct the referendum on behalf of the District Councils for approximately the same cost as in 2007.

The Leader of Council responded that the Covid-19 Regulations were clear that no polls or elections were permitted until May 2021 which was beyond the date of the decision on the unitary councils. There was a consultation period taking place and the Government would conduct their own 8 week consultation on the unitary proposals.

The Council were addressed by the Branch Secretary for Unison. She said that a joint steering group had issued a statement as the recognised union that represented staff across all five authorities covered by the unitary proposals. UNISON branches were working collaboratively across the county and were highly engaged with the proposals that had been put forward by both the District Councils and the County Council. They had commissioned an independent report from the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) to critically analyse the two competing business cases. UNISON would be appraising each on the basis of, quality of services; protection of decent employment and skills; effective local democratic oversight and accountability; and whether they deliver an integrated vision for future public sector provision of services. UNISON had approached management to request ongoing meaningful engagement throughout the process and to establish terms and reference for how they could work together.

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## **167. Chairman's Announcements (Agenda Item 4)**

The Chairman advised that Councillor Mike Best was assisting him in the role of Vice Chairman for the evening.

The Chairman asked Members to bear in mind the staff across all the authorities in Somerset in their discussions on the Stronger Somerset Business Case. Staff had faced the challenges of the Transformation Programme, dealing with Covid-19 and were now facing the reorganisation of Local Government in Somerset. He also asked that they remember the people of Somerset who they had been elected to serve and who would be most impacted by the changes.

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## **168. Stronger Somerset Business Case (Agenda Item 5)**

The Leader of Council introduced the report and said she was proud to support the Stronger Somerset Business Case as it was a once in a generation opportunity to improve local government in Somerset. She said that she did not support one Unitary council for Somerset as it would be one of the largest in the country. She noted that Sedgemoor DC had approved the Stronger Somerset Business Case the previous evening and Mendip and Somerset West and Taunton Councils were both meeting that evening. She outlined the history of the work of the 5 Somerset Councils to work more closely to deliver local government services to the communities in a better way.

She said there Government's white paper, expected to be published in the Autumn was expected to favour Unitary councils. Two Unitary councils would allow them to stay closer to their communities whereas in the SCC proposed one unitary council there would be far fewer Councillors which would create a democratic deficit. Engagement with Town & Parish Councils was already underway. If the District Councils were invited by the Secretary of State to submit a business case for unitary status then they needed to be able to respond in a timely manner. She commended the Business Case to Members and invited questions.

Councillor John Clark said he strongly supported the business case and read out a statement explaining his reasons as scale, democracy and reform. He said there were currently 269 County and District Councillors representing a population of 569,000 which was 2,115 residents per Councillor. The single unitary option proposed 100 Councillors which would mean nearly 6,000 residents per Councillor which was a 63% reduction in local representation. The two unitary proposal would mean a reduction of 26% which was acceptable. He said the District Councils were more involved with local towns, villages and residents and he felt that a single unitary authority, which would be the second largest in the country, would not embrace the current local involvement.

In response to questions from Members, the Leader of Council responded:

- She frequently attended Town & Parish Council meetings at their invitation.
- The Business Case was only outline at this stage and was written as a submission to the Government. The detail and implementation plan would be worked out by the shadow authority when it was set up.
- The Minister had indicated that a letter of invitation would be received by the Councils and he expected to receive their Business Case by the end of September 2020, although that may change as the Minister had now changed. An 8 week consultation period was expected on the two Business Cases with a decision expected by the Government in January 2021 and a shadow authority set up by April 2021. Elections to the new Council was expected in May 2022.
- An elected Mayor would be part of a Combined Authority which would be a tier above a Unitary Authority and although it was not yet known what would be in the Government's Devolution Bill, they had been clear that North Yorkshire, Cumbria & Somerset were proposed for Unitary Authorities.

During discussion, the following points were made:

- The South West attracted an older retired population and so resources needed to be increased in terms of healthcare.
- Appreciate it is not possible to have a referendum on the unitary issue but the services were provided for the people of the county.

- The One Somerset unitary authority proposal was too big for the county.
- All Councillors whether District, County or Parish worked extremely hard for the residents they represented.
- There was no opportunity to hold a referendum on the proposals due to the Covid-19 pandemic although had it been possible, one would have been held.
- Two Unitary authorities would represent the local people better.
- The comparison between District Council services and County Council services was biased as they both dealt with different services.
- The 5 existing councils in Somerset would be disbanded and a new shadow authority set up with a cabinet consisting of the Chief Executives and Leaders of the 5 authorities. This would be an entirely new authority to serve the residents of Somerset.
- Local Community Networks were proposed as part of the County Council's One Somerset proposal which were intended to give local people a greater say than they currently had.
- The proposed Childrens Trust and the Care Alliance could end up as quangos and do as they please.
- The final decision would be made by the Secretary of State.
- A 23% reduction in representation would mean 15 less Councillors in South Somerset when a recent Boundary Review had confirmed 60.
- Two Unitary Authorities would be a duplication of officers and senior executives when the public just wanted services provided.
- The Government's preference appeared to be for a strong Shire Authority with an elected Mayor with powers to bid for central Government funding.
- A plebiscite or non-binding referendum was held in 2007 on the last Unitary Council bid and it was rejected by the residents who took part.
- The savings were greater by having 2 Unitary Authorities as the business case retained democracy and improved the underlying processes. There was a stronger focus on the needs of communities and of employers.
- The employment interests of the West of the county were different to those in the East.
- Some services and processes were best dealt with across the county and partnerships and new practices like the proposed Childrens Trust represented best practice.
- Staff recruitment and retention was critical over the next two years so it was not helpful to criticise some SCC services in the business case.
- Had discussions with staff taken place on the proposed delivery of the services of the Unitary Authorities.
- It was important that the public engaged in the public consultation process.
- Whatever the outcome, there should be better quality services delivered to all of the residents in Somerset by a simpler structure.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a full referendum could not be held at the current time due to the Covid-19 restrictions, but, he would confirm to Members if an advisory referendum, taken as a guide to residents opinions on the business cases could be held.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Leader of Council said that they had been unable to discuss the Stronger Somerset Business Case with SCC as they had chosen to pursue their own one unitary authority bid. The conclusion would either be one or two brand new councils and they would not be a take-over by any one authority. The Stronger Somerset proposal was not just about cutting costs but also improving the lives of residents. The proposal has been worked on and agreed by all 4 District Councils. She

proposed the recommendations of the report and they were seconded by Councillor Peter Seib. A named vote was taken and the voting was 38 in favour, 13 against, 0 abstentions.

The Chairman said it was incumbent on all Councillors to work together no matter what the final decision of the Government was. He thanked all Councillors who had contributed to the debate on what was an important issue for the residents of the county. He also noted that Councillors should support the staff through the period of uncertainty.

**RESOLVED:** That Full Council agreed to:-

- a. approve the Business Case for the reform of local government including the creation of 2 unitary Councils within Somerset.
- 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.

**Reason:** To agree the Stronger Somerset Business Case for change in Somerset for the purposes of submission to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in September 2020.

*(Voting: 38 in favour, 13 against, 0 abstentions)*

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#### **169. Motions (Agenda Item 6)**

There were no Motions submitted by Members.

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#### **170. Questions Under Procedure Rule 10 (Agenda Item 7)**

There were no questions submitted under Procedure Rule 10.

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#### **171. Date of Next Meeting (Agenda Item 8)**

Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Full Council would take place on **Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2020** as a virtual meeting using Zoom meeting software commencing at **6.00 p.m.**

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Chairman

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Date