

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	Cabinet	
MEETING/ DECISION DATE:	5th November 2020	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE: E 3241
TITLE:	Government invitation to Somerset to submit locally led proposals for unitary local government	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM/		
List of attachments to this report: None		

1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 On 9th October 2020, the Council received a letter from the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government inviting submission for locally led proposals for unitary local government in Somerset (nationally alongside North Yorkshire and Cumbria).
- 1.2 The Councils in these three areas now have the opportunity to develop and submit their proposals for how they want to restructure local government to establish unitary local government.

2 RECOMMENDATION

Cabinet is asked to:

- 2.1 Consider this report and recommend to Council that it does not submit a proposal for local government reorganisation in Somerset, and
- 2.2 Publicly indicate its intention to continue to act as a separate local unitary authority council (Bath & North East Somerset Council) but continue to co-operate with all public sector partners (including neighbouring councils) to offer the best services it can to its local residents and visitors.

3 THE REPORT

- 3.1 In May 2018, Somerset County Council announced its intention to start a conversation with the district councils and other partners to explore which model of local government could offer a better way to deliver public services in Somerset.

- 3.2 All the councils in Somerset indicated that they recognised the need for change in local government in Somerset and committed to working together on a joint review of achieve this.
- 3.3 Early discussions involved Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset County Council, South Somerset District Council, Somerset West & Taunton Council, North Somerset Council and Bath & North East Somerset Council.
- 3.4 The local councils in Somerset (excluding Bath and North East Somerset Council and North Somerset) commissioned a report into the future of local government in Somerset. A consortium led by Ignite consulting - together with Collaborate, Pixel Financial Management and De Montfort University - was selected to undertake research into the broad range of options from a variety of perspectives including community benefits and financial efficiency. The report outlined a number of options for the councils to consider.
- 3.5 In order to ensure Bath & North East Somerset Council could objectively take part in early discussions, in late 2018 the administration commissioned some advice on the implications of being part of Somerset and decided not to take active part in the study.
- 3.6 The outcome of the report stated that there were *“significant risks to the Council’s ability to deliver its strategic priorities. This applies across all strategic priorities, noting that the proposed financial impact along with the ability of B&NES to be able to develop policies and interventions specific to its socio-economic environment are likely to be hampered”*. “Consideration has been given towards the potential of the positive impact that LGR may deliver to the region and more specifically the residents and communities of B&NES. However, any benefits are deemed insignificant compared to the scale of risk associated with the proposal.”
- 3.7 After receiving the report and following due consideration, the Council therefore declined to take part in any further formal discussions and indicated that it could not support a change to the local government structure within Somerset if it included any changes to Bath & North East Somerset Council's powers or boundaries. The current administration does not think that situation has changed so doesn't wish to join in with any of the proposals on the table or makes its own proposals.
- 3.8 On 2 July 2018 the Council considered and agreed a motion from the Liberal Democrat group

Somerset Councils (Lib Dem)

Council:

4. *Believes it is appropriate for B&NES Council to be involved in discussions about future local government structures in Somerset.*

5. *Agrees that the creation of a Somerset super-unitary authority incorporating B&NES Council would be undesirable and would not benefit B&NES residents.*
6. *Believes that evidence would be required to show whether a unitary authority covering the areas of B&NES and Mendip District Councils would be of benefit to residents and businesses in both areas before any further steps are taken.*
7. *Instructs the Leader to ensure that discussions on this issue are carried out with full transparency and that no formal processes are to take place without democratic oversight by Council.*

In the light of this Cabinet is making a recommendation to Council

- 3.9 In 2020, the four-district council jointly submitted a revised plan to central government. The districts claimed that their proposal, Stronger Somerset, was a plan that offers a fresh start for Somerset and would give them more control over their future with more power and more funding to invest in their communities. The plan will simplify the local government structure with two new councils for East and West, while creating a Combined Authority so more decisions can be made locally.
- 3.10 In summer 2020, Somerset County Council had already taken the decision to pursue change for the place and had published a full business case that was submitted to and would be considered by central government. The business case outlined their view that that the two-tier system in Somerset has reached the limits of not only the ability to deliver successfully for residents now, but to be able to do so into the future. The business case has shown that for Somerset, of all four scenarios investigated, the move to a single unitary model would realise the greatest benefits. Several options have been considered in the county's full business case and there are a number of reasons as to why they have chosen to pursue one unitary authority as the preferred option.
- 3.11 Bath & North East Somerset Council currently considers that's its natural economic links are to the West of England and along the M4 corridor and not south into Somerset, any proposals for local government reorganisation in Somerset involving the Council could jeopardise these links.
- 3.12 Also, any reorganisation involving Bath & North East Somerset Council would inevitably result in a change to the current arrangements for the West of England Combined authority. This would be very destabilising at a time when we are focused on the recovery and renewal of the economy as we face up to the ongoing challenge of the COVID pandemic.
- 3.13 The government announced on the 9 October 2020 that councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset were invited to submit locally led proposals for unitary local government, responding to requests from these areas.

3.14 Councils in these 3 areas can now develop and submit their proposals for how they want to restructure local government in their area to establish unitary local government. This would mean moving from a two-tier system of county and district councils, to a system where there is a single tier for any given area. The submissions must be made by the 9th November

3.15 The Cabinet need to determine whether it wishes to make any proposals on behalf of Bath & North East Somerset Council, and determine its recommendation to full Council.

4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Council's Constitution 'Part 4 B (Access to Information Procedure Rules) - Urgency Rule 15' has been used for this report as the invitation letter from the Secretary of State on Local Government reorganisation arrived after the 28 days publication deadline for the Cabinet meeting on 5th November.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

5.1 There are no resource implications in not submitting a proposal to central government for local government reorganisation within Somerset.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision-making risk management guidance.

7 EQUALITIES

7.1 There are no equalities implications in not submitting a proposal to central government for local government reorganisation within Somerset.

8 CLIMATE CHANGE

8.1 There are no climate change implications in not submitting a proposal to central government for local government reorganisation within Somerset.

9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 Report outlines the discussions that have gone on since this issue was first raised by the Councils in Somerset. Council. The Council has considered these previously as set out.

9.2 Although the invitation from the Secretary of State is open to Bath & North East Somerset to reply to there is no evidence that the issues have changed since then.

10 CONSULTATION

10.1 This report has been cleared by the S151 and Monitoring Officer.

Contact person	David Trethewey, Director of Partnerships & Corporate Services Steve Harman, Head of Business Support & Performance
Background papers	
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	