

Recommendations on the Role of Parish Councils in the event of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Somerset.

Commissioned by the Somerset Association of Local Councils and the Somerset Branch of the Society of Local Council Clerks. With assistance from Glastonbury Town and Frome Town Councils.

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Executive Summary

With sufficient goodwill and innovation, and in partnership with parishes, it is possible to create, through the LGR disruption, improved community engagement, creative partnerships and highly tailored local services that will go some way to addressing current and future problems and community needs in Somerset. Any real gains from LGR will not come from boundary changes but rethinking how multiple community issues are addressed in the future. If at the end of the reorganisation the same services and functions end up being managed in the same way with the same outcomes, then a real opportunity will have been missed.

Often the views of parishes are missing from LGR debates. The purpose of this paper is to ensure that all parishes in Somerset are aware of what is being proposed in relation to LGR, to make a strong case for parishes to be included as partners in preparing for LGR and to identify possible ways of improving the outcome. The commissioners do not pretend that this report contains all of the answers, nor will everyone agree with its contents, it is however an entry to the debate.

This report does not advocate reorganisation nor does it have a preferred solution. It provides for the possibility of self-reflection on the role of local government and the needs of the communities of Somerset. Seven recommendations are made (note where unitary is referred to this could mean more than one council).

Recommendation 1. A Charter for Somerset

SALC and SLCC with the help of a cross section of parishes to work in partnership with the proposed unitary to develop a unique Charter for Somerset. One that builds upon the lessons drawn from neighbouring LGR decisions, includes rights and responsibilities, mutual expectations and identifies new possibilities, procedures and ways of working. The Charter should be a living document, reviewed bi-annually and be binding.

Recommendation 2. Local Ownership and devolution

Parishes to be involved in determining the methodology behind the devolution of assets, how services and functions are to be transferred, the resources dedicated to ensuring a smooth transition, how decisions can be transparent and a draft timetable. The overriding philosophy on devolution should be “by request”, recognising the diversity of capability and motivation within parishes/communities and the ability of the unitary to handle multiple contacts and aspirations.

Recommendation 3. Localism and Solutions

Localism is a way of tackling issues through which parishes and a unitary council can encourage and recognise the significance of local solutions, local innovations and local community groups in tackling isolation, vulnerability, environmental concerns and the local economy. It can be a way of giving voice, choice and control to communities and it is hard to underestimate the importance of sense of place, recognising a common story and fostering pride. The unitary and parishes to commission a “Somerset Guide to Localism” including good examples, outcomes and meaningful partnerships.

Recommendation 4. Local Governance

There are 278 parishes in Somerset and a new unitary will have to communicate with all of them. A common method seen elsewhere is to cluster parishes in Community Networks. How such a Network is established is a crucial decision around engagement, it could potentially be the difference between success and failure. Parishes to be involved in establishing the boundaries, brief, representation and procedures of these Networks from day one.

Recommendation 5. Local Presence

It's pivotal for a new unitary to have a dedicated and supported senior staff presence based locally in each Community Network to assist in ensuring proper coordination, engagement and communication within the network and to feedback to/sort out with the unitary on cross cutting issues, blockages and decision making. Representatives of parishes to be involved in the appointment of the staff.

Recommendation 6. Trust and Partnership

To build trust, a 5 year joint cultural and development programme for staff and members be established. A team drawn from local government, partners and a suitable University be created to think beyond the immediate concerns of LGR to create a unique road map showing genuine possibilities for greater engagement, localism, resilience and innovative solutions.

Recommendation 7. Parishes Working Together

Parishes need to recognise that LGR is the biggest change to local government in Somerset for decades. The impact on local councils will be profound and should not be underestimated. Through SALC and SLCC parishes need to run a concerted campaign, establish a dedicated steering group of representative councils and find sufficient resources to ensure that their voices are heard loud and clear in the run up to, implementation and subsequent working of the new unitary.

Section 1. Introduction

1.1 It appears that the possibility of Local Government Re-Organisation (LGR) or at least a reshuffle is likely for Somerset in the not too distant future. In most other areas this has led to disagreements between Districts and the County, sometimes with several structural options being proposed. In rural areas the outcome has often been the emergence of a new unitary authority based on the former County boundaries. This is the model followed regionally by Wiltshire, Dorset (where 2 super unitaries were created) and Cornwall. In Somerset the debate seems to be centring around one unitary or “deeper collaboration” between existing authorities, although more recently a new preference has emerged for two unitaries using an east west split with a combined authority to deal with strategic concerns.

1.2 In all LGR cases savings are forecast and services are claimed to be more efficient and capable of being better understood by local communities. With one or two admirable exceptions the role of parish councils has been a secondary consideration at best. However, parishes and towns have often been expected by the new unitary to inherit many local environmental services; allotments, parks and recreation, grass cutting and so on. There are examples of more adventurous transfers of power and greater influence but they are few and far between.

1.3 There is a feeling in some counties that parishes have been used as pawns in the LGR merry go round. Yes, consulted, but not seen as serious players with much to contribute. Other commentators

have questioned the whole *raison d'être* of LGR pointing out that the emphasis on structural change and supposed efficiencies might be misplaced. Surely they say the question should be “what is best for the communities of Somerset and what is the most effective way to tackle the “wicked issues” faced now and in the future rather than just identifying the most efficient way of running current services?”

1.4 This report does not enter the structural debate. That work is left to others. However important points are made about services and functions that could be devolved, how new democratic arrangements could be forged and how issues around resilience should be tackled.

Section 2. What happens next on LGR?

2.1 A standard format has developed leading to a decision on LGR and it goes something like this. One or more Councils triggers a starting gun by writing to the Secretary of State (now done by the County Council). He/she can decline but usually gives a green light. Once that is received business cases are commissioned by the Councils involved which evaluate potential savings and improvements and the advantages and disadvantages of different configurations of Unitary government.

2.2 The individual council or groups of councils set out to consult the public and parishes. A programme of residents' surveys, roadshows and meetings is organised and a web-based site is developed explaining the options in detail.

2.3 Once the business cases are submitted and assessed the Secretary of State finally signals that he/she is “minded to approve” the proposal or not. This can be a long process and questions are often asked about how robust are the savings, do the staff know what's happening, are the public and parishes truly engaged and how can promises be fulfilled once the dust has settled.

Section 3. Summary of District and County Arguments

3.1 Somerset has a three-tier system - Somerset County Council looks after highways, social care, some education and social services among other things. Alongside it, four district councils provide services such as planning, housing and recreation. Closest to the ground are 278 parish councils which vary from one meeting a year to sizeable town councils with meaty budgets and programmes.

3.2 In 2019 the 4 Districts and the County commissioned the Future of Local Government in Somerset Report (FOLGIS) and the various councils set out their stalls identifying their preferred future options.

3.3 The leaders of the five authorities as sponsors of the FOLGIS report appear to agree on one thing – that things can't remain the same. They also believe that any changes have to be driven by the ability to deliver services in a better way and that the objective of reorganisation is not all about saving money.

3.4 In recognition of the need to change, the report notes that service needs across Somerset are evolving, demand is increasing, and a new collaborative delivery strategy is needed. The issues to be tackled include:

- Disadvantaged children: Somerset has low social mobility and high numbers of “troubled families”, with both poverty and deprivation being on the rise;
- Young people: there are issues with children not being able to access higher education, as well as high levels of self-harm and little genuinely affordable housing in the county;
- The economy: Somerset's economy is generally low-wage and low-skill, with productivity also

being a problem. The county has poor digital connectivity (e.g. broadband) and there are big problems with public and private transport;

- The environment: Somerset's councils are working to become carbon neutral, but more work is needed to tackle emissions and reduce the risk of flooding across the county; and
- Older people: Somerset's elderly population is rising as its working population declines – in the next 15 years, the number of people aged 85 and over could rise by 88 per cent. With that comes issues about the provision and quality of health and social care, as well as tackling social isolation and loneliness.

3.5 The report identified seven structural options, although how they are connected to the issues to be resolved is at this time hard to fathom. Most options have now fallen away leaving two front runners.

Section 4. What has emerged?

4.1 The four districts favour closer collaboration and integration without abolishing the two-tier system. This includes integrated leadership teams, shared internal support and a single common strategy. The County Council would prefer one unitary with all of the above advantages but based on the county boundaries. This option is seen by its proponents as the easiest model to understand and the one that could produce the most savings at least cost. More recently the four districts have favoured two unitaries based on an east/west split with South Somerset and Mendip in the east and Sedgemoor and Somerset West and Taunton in the west. At the time of writing there are no other obvious contenders although some councillors are promoting a merger for part of Mendip with BANES.

Section 5. Where does that leave Parishes in Somerset?

5.1 All of the options will impact on parishes in Somerset. In the run up to determining the preferred solution there will be much debate and even angst amongst aficionados. Semi-arbitrary boundary lines, the identification of the savings that will reputedly accrue and the survival of cherished organisations will prove far more attractive for comment and analysis than trying to find new ways of stemming the burgeoning demand on services and resolving local community issues arising from life altering environmental, social and economic conditions. That growing demand, particularly children's and adult social services, will in any case soon dwarf any proposed savings.

5.2 Any real gains from LGR will come from rethinking how multiple community issues are addressed in the future. If the same services and functions end up being managed in the same way with the same outcomes, then a real opportunity will be missed. And that's where Parishes can help.

5.3 Parish Councils in Somerset are a mixed bag. Some are very small with tiny budgets and precepts, some spend millions and have wide ranging functions. It all depends upon the nature and size of the parish and their ambition. No size fits all and that parish diversity is a strength but also, of course, a weakness.

5.4 On the whole the smaller parishes deal with allotments, bus stops, toilets and minor environmental concerns. A big change occurred through the Localism Act in 2011 when parishes were granted the General Power of Competence. In simple terms it gave parishes the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation. This opened the door to almost limitless possibilities and led to some parishes introducing significant innovations with greater confidence in fields such as housing, wellbeing, economic development, trading, community development and neighbourhood planning.

5.5 It is fair to say that some parishes have a limited view of their role and are happy with their current plans. Some focus on process and procedures and are less than willing to raise the local precept. Others are keen to make a difference and have adapted readily to new innovations and ways of working.

Section 6. Looking ahead

6.1 Let's assume that two proposals involving unitary authorities are advanced as technical and structural panaceas for Somerset. Let's also assume that the "red lines" debate has dominated discussion but finally town and parish councils are asked what their preferences might be. Should they plump for the one that appears to save most money or maybe the one that majors on geographical proximity or perhaps none at all? If LGR is to proceed the objective parishes might want to adopt is "is it possible to use LGR to create within Somerset a new type of community engagement and partnership whilst encouraging tailored services that will best serve future community needs?"

6.2 The remainder of the report explores the role of parishes (and communities themselves) in achieving that objective. It draws conclusions, makes suggestions, proposals and even demands for a new unitary to take into considerations when preparing their business case. In effect by being clear about its wishes the parish sector can influence the outcome of LGR and contribute to producing a more viable outcome.

Section 7. Communities and the Future

7.1 Although this report majors on the future role of parishes in Somerset there are wider community considerations and trends that will influence the way parishes and a unitary will operate over the next 15 to 20 years. In the recommendations we recommend that these future considerations be part of a radical Somerset study that identifies how events might unfold and how communities might deal with the outcomes. There are six headings:

7.1.2 Localism

There is growing political consensus nationally on the need to decentralise power and influence. Locally it is clear that the scale and complexity of Somerset's challenges are so great they are unlikely to be effectively addressed from a unitary council which is too distant from recognising and responding to local concerns.

Strengthening localism, in whatever forms, offers the potential to tackle disadvantage, rebalance the local economy, and revitalise democracy. In public service design and delivery, it can also ensure that services are equipped to address local needs, harness local assets and improve local employment and investment.

Localism is also about giving voice, choice and control to communities who have in the past been mere recipients. It enables innovative local solutions to emerge through partnership and collaboration centred around place, whether villages or towns. It also provides the platform for social action to thrive whether through the work of voluntary or community organisations.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of sense of place, recognising a common story and fostering pride. Localism is about the connections and feelings of belonging that unite people within their communities. It is about how people perceive their own power and ability to make change in their local area alongside their neighbours. And people do care, if approached in the right way and with the correct mind-set, most people appreciate engagement, they care about their neighbour, their street, their friends and relatives. Taking part in local action can strengthen feelings of community cohesion, generate a greater sense of pride and purpose, and improve wellbeing.

7.1.3 Connections

The nature and quality of relationships in communities is the foundation stone of their success. It is the most effective way to bring people together given the massive price of loneliness and perceived isolation. Research suggests that particularly important are "weak ties", saying hello to people, recognising a friendly face and attending the same local events are especially important in creating

embeddedness. Weak ties have suffered badly in recent decades amid the loss of meeting places, greater use of the car and increasing busyness. We should take pride and celebrate the place we share together...it's story, its beauty, its quirks, its diversity and its resilience in the face of challenges.

7.1.4 Resilience

The decade ahead is likely to be characterized by shock, stresses and turbulence. There will be an intensifying impact of climate change and global heating. Parishes need to create the capacity for greater resilience. Of course, no community can be self-sufficient but it can benefit from being self-reliant. Can for example communities create skills and knowledge to support local enterprise and economies? Can initiatives as varying as community energy sources and credit unions lead to greater self-reliance? There are already examples in Somerset of communities and parishes investing in their own skills and enterprises.

7.1.5 Collaboration.

Exploring not just what works but why, learning rapidly from other communities and parishes, investing time and resources into greater collaboration will be essential. Different kinds of organisations will have to come together; parishes, grassroots community groups, businesses, charities, social enterprises, individuals, the NHS and more. There will be tensions for example between ultra-local but innovative parishes and powerful but potentially bureaucratic unitaries. The new opportunities and threats this will create will mean having to make it up as we go along. Creativity and risk taking and the ability to learn quickly from experiments will be essential.

7.1.6 Inclusive Politics.

Participative and representative democracy can mesh together and deal with competing priorities at a local level. New political dynamics are likely to emerge as climate change shifts policy around power generation, transport and the built environment. So we need to build trust in the democratic process. There will be a premium on local forms of politics...fair, locally understandable, transparent, flexible, accountable and open to everyone.

7.1.7 Advocacy.

Successful places and local councils will recognise the power of advocacy and campaigning. They will organise, mobilise and communicate in pursuit of the support they need. Sometimes that may be for more money but also influence, deliberation, engagement and decision making.

7.1.8 These six factors amount to an immense challenge. The current system will no longer be able to cope, parishes as part of any LGR change need to rethink their role or be in danger of disappearing into the archives of history.

Section 8. Involving Parishes and Communities

8.1 The FOLGIS report spelled out the issues facing Somerset now and in the future. They were centred around disadvantaged children, young people, the economy, older people and the environment including climate change. They will be the same problems faced by a new unitary authority(ies) and be just as unaffordable as they are now. Parishes could help enormously in addressing some of these issues; in many cases whilst the responsibility may lie at a strategic level the solution can often be found locally, sometimes even at street level.

8.2 There are six interdependent areas in which any change could occur:

- **local governance** encouraging and finding new routes for local communities and parishes to be

- more involved in local decision making and having greater influence and control;
- **locally led innovations**, using new and existing mechanisms to give parishes and communities the tools they need to deliver local social, environmental and economic improvements;
- **finding local solutions** by making sure all players in an area work closely together to make best use of all resources;
- **local ownership** through the devolution of assets and services to community groups and parishes;
- **local partnerships** based on building trusting and respectful relationships on the ground to build local capacity; and
- **local spending** priorities aimed at saving money and producing better results.

8.3 Local Governance and decision making

8.3.1 One of the current problems with local democracy is the lack of delegation. Too many decisions are made remotely; physically, intellectually and emotionally. If one or two unitaries are created in Somerset the gulf between them and local councils and communities will be greater than ever. New ways will have to be found to shift power and decision making down without re-creating a new bureaucratic tier. This is a two-way process, the unitary needs to “think parishes” but equally parish councillors need to grow in confidence and optimism if they are to play an expanded role.

8.3.2 An important element found elsewhere where unitaries have been created are the variously named Area Boards, Neighbourhood Networks, Community Connections and so on. This report will refer to them Community Networks (CNs). CNs involving clusters of parishes (and other partners) have been established as devolution vehicles to partially bridge the gap left by the districts. Often but not exclusively they have been centred around market towns and their surrounding parishes although sometimes they follow other boundaries such as Clinical Care Commissioning Groups. Whatever the *raison d'être* behind their boundaries they have broadly similar roles:

- delegated decision making;
- monitoring the quality of services locally;
- engaging with local people on issues of concern and shaping the local political agenda;
- influencing the unitary council and other strategic partners like the police and the NHS and the voluntary and business sectors;
- supporting and developing local partnerships;
- helping to develop local projects and funding bids to respond to community needs; and/or
- offering an opportunity to manage and allocate devolved budgets.

8.3.3 Discussions where CN's have been established suggest that if these new networks are not to become merely talking shops the best of them appoint, in each area, a dedicated senior community development officer with sufficient staff and resource support. These locally based officers provide the essential link between the strategic priorities of the unitary and action at a local level. They should be connected into strategic level decision making through a corporate director on the Management Team of the unitary. Sometimes local action plans based on the strategic needs of the unitary, and community are jointly developed providing a mandate through which the CN can influence service providers as well as developing local projects and innovative schemes.

8.3.4 The networks usually involve regular meetings with agendas, reports, minutes and in some cases manage a significant local budget stretching from community grants to small highways schemes. They enable two-way communications and new innovations to be shared across the board.

8.3.5 Voting on most networks appears to be rare, the majority decisions are made by consensus. However, where votes are taken the options run from the restrictive, where only unitary members can vote, to equal votes for every invited organisation.

8.3.6 In Somerset, if the area presence is to be tangible and meaningful there needs to be a way of engaging parishes in the formation, establishment and transparency of the CN's. Open to the public they should be a crucial and central part of the new council's governance procedures. How they are established, their remit, their staffing levels and resource allocation will all be crucial to their success.

8.4 Finding Local Solutions

8.4.1 Sometimes only truly local solutions present themselves. In Frome for example Active and In Touch aimed at vulnerable or lonely older people and Edventure at younger participants looking to develop new skills are both locality specific but capable of being replicated. There are many examples across the country of parishes combating isolation, running sports centres, engaging local communities by innovative means, starting dementia friendly towns, supporting wellbeing schemes, running community transport, establishing community fridges, taking over libraries and running youth services.

8.4.2 Even the smallest village could adopt its own local solutions. Think of an imaginary person, let's call her Alice. She is 85, lives on her own since her husband died, she lives in her own house but can't afford to maintain it and the garden is badly overgrown. The shop in the village has recently closed, the surgery is 10 miles away and the bus service is twice a day. Alice now knows few people in the village as new younger couples have moved in with children. Surely the parish council should be less concerned about grass verges and should start thinking more about Alice. Why not a volunteer car club to take her to the surgery, persuading the local pub to put on subsidised hot meals for Alice and others to have a proper meal twice a week at quiet times. Perhaps establish a contract with a local handyman with fixed hourly rates as Alice can't even change a lightbulb, a garden tidy up and maybe even a local teenager to teach Alice how to use a tablet to do her shopping on line and skype her daughter in Australia?

8.5 Local Ownership of assets.

8.5.1 This is the area that attracts most interest in LGR debates. It is often couched in terms of "what can we legitimately shift to someone else" from the unitary and "what do we want to have" from the parish (if anything). Negotiations are frequently long drawn out, centred around towns and usually involve physical assets. It's vital however that the process recognises that every community is different, that negotiations have to be specific and that a Swiss cheese effect of dotted service provision will result for the unitary, which in the end will have to be rationalised. The most common approach to devolution has been to invite community groups, local councils and others to approach the unitary with requests to transfer, it could be individual building or a wholesale transfer involving all assets or services in a town or large village.

8.5.2 Under this approach requests are measured on a matrix against shared aims such as increasing satisfaction, providing greater local influence, generating greater community pride and engagement and enhancing the role of local councils. Criteria are then applied assessing social value, capital receipts and revenue effects as well as capacity, capability and local ambition.

8.5.3 There are at least 5 outcomes that could arise from the matrix:

- Outcome 1. Influencing and Monitoring
- Outcome 2. Joint /enhanced delivery
- Outcome 3. Agency Agreements

Final draft 5 June 2020

- Outcome 4. Delegated Authority
- Outcome 5. Full transfer of services or assets

Resources are likely to be concentrated on projects that offer the greatest level of impact and are most likely to be deliverable.

8.5.4 Functions and assets that might be considered for transfer include:

- Control of markets;
- Maintenance of highway verges, open spaces, footways and footpaths;
- Parks, recreation area, allotments and unused land;
- Community, office and redundant buildings;
- Sports and arts centres;
- Tree preservation orders;
- Maintenance of closed churchyards;
- Street cleansing (such as litter picking, sweeping and graffiti removal);
- Public conveniences;
- Noise and nuisance abatement;
- Recycling provision;
- Street naming;
- Street lighting (except on principal roads);
- Parking restrictions;
- Off and on street car-parking, highway potholes;
- Road safety and restriction measures’;
- Issue of bus and rail passes or other transport voucher schemes;
- Licences for taxis, street trading or public entertainment;
- Some aspects of planning development control;
- Library and museum management or ownership; and
- Leisure and tourism provision.

8.6 Locally led socially minded Innovations

8.6.1 Socially minded businesses in the UK are growing rapidly and no less so in Somerset: a full third of small and medium sized enterprises have social aims at their heart, many of them firmly anchored in local communities, with the sector worth three times more to the UK than agriculture and employing as many people as the creative industry.

8.6.2 Local government, including parishes, is increasingly willing to work with these organisations as delivery partners as evidenced by the County's micro business programme for adult social care. One scenario for the next decade could see existing partnerships between these kinds of organisation evolve into something much more complex and sophisticated: a web of local social and economic systems that

seamlessly blend local government's capacity to set frameworks and incentives with the capacity of both business and non-profits to innovate and deliver.

8.7 Local spending

8.7.1 Saving money will be foremost on the mind of any new unitary. Over the last decade local government has lost £15bn of its core funding, that is 60p in every £1 and the funding gap is predicted to be £8bn by 2025 whilst demand, especially from an older population, continues to rise. As a result, even the most optimistic of savings forecast arising from LGR will continue to be dwarfed by overall financial shortages. Meanwhile recent developments have seen the rise of the "super parish" with precepts of well over a million. In 19/20 forty-five parishes doubled their precept and across the country parish precepts amount to £554m.

8.7.2 Locally, ten years after reorganisation Chippenham Town Council bit the bullet and finally took on the remaining Wiltshire unitary services including green spaces, play areas, street cleansing, markets, sports and arts centres and allotments. Their precept is now £2.9m.

8.7.3 Savings will be important to central government when making any final decision on LGR in Somerset but parishes need to be aware that if they are to maximise the benefits for their local community some hard decisions lie ahead on possible tax rises and rethinking their role.

8.8 Building Trust and Partnership.

Much of what has been written about here depends upon changes in mind-set and cultures which are as profound as they are essential. And it's two ways. Any unitary needs to put localism at the heart of its thinking and ensure that implementation and ongoing relationships are well resourced and not merely after thoughts or platitudes. Local councils equally need to fulfil their promises, be outward looking, be ambitious and professional. This suggests the need for, firstly, a compact that both sides can refer to and use as a template and, secondly, a highly symbolic joint organisational development programme to assist parishes and the County Association to step up to the mark.

Conclusion

As the LGR process unfolds more issues will emerge and there will be a need for further reports and monitoring. The easiest option by some way for parishes would be to ignore what is happening and let the outcomes just occur. However, if maximum benefits are to accrue to the communities of Somerset from LGR it is essential that parishes work in concert with one another and in partnership with any proposed unitary to achieve lasting and workable conclusions.