

One Somerset – A Unitary Authority for Somerset

A Prospectus for Business

Background

The concept of one local authority for Somerset is not new. The last time businesses were consulted on the issue was in 2007 when the consensus was that, on balance, the status quo of a county council, five district councils and a number of town and parish councils supported the needs of residents and business in the county adequately.

However, from a business perspective, a lot has happened in the last thirteen years that has had lasting impacts on our businesses, councils and more recently our way of life: -

- The economic “crash” from 2008.
- Ten years of national austerity measures to assist an economic recovery.
- Large reduction in investment in local services due to reduced budgets, together with competitive bidding for funds for Councils from Government.
- The continued uncertainty associated with the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union.
- The global COVID19 pandemic and its impact on our residents, public services, and economy.

As with business, the public sector has had to respond to the financial challenges that these issues have caused, not least, managing to deliver vital services on heavily reduced budgets. Furthermore, as in business “salami slicing” of budgets can only take you so far after which a fundamental transformational shift is required. The business case (www.onesomerset.org.uk) suggests annual savings of £18.5m against the status quo, with service delivery being improved.

It should be noted that most areas across the south west are governed through a unitary structure with the only other exception being Devon.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has acknowledged receipt of the One Somerset unitary proposal and now seeks further consultation before making a decision.

One Somerset’s vision is for a new unitary authority which will provide seamless and accessible local governance to the people of Somerset, with services redesigned to be delivered within communities at a local level.

A new unitary authority would enable some key improvements to how Somerset’s local government will work by:

1. Establishing one council listening to the needs and concerns of residents, parishes and business, providing clear accountability to the public
2. Facilitating sustainable delivery of outstanding public services to improve the quality of life of all Somerset's residents and businesses.
3. Empowering communities and embedding delivery at local level to increase community resilience and the ability to respond to local challenges.
4. Giving a much stronger voice for Somerset on a national and international stage
5. Offering consistent leadership with key partners to better influence local service delivery
6. Reducing duplication and provide better value across the entire county.

So, what are the economic challenges and opportunities the county faces and why is this important?

- **A diverse geography.** The Office of National Statistics classifies 48% of Somerset's population as living in a rural setting. However, it has three sub-regional centres (Taunton, Yeovil and Bridgwater) which comprise around 35% of total population and seven further towns with over 10,000 people each. Governing Somerset means balancing the requirements of rural and urban areas.
- **Economic links and assets.** Somerset's economic geography is pulled north to Bristol & Bath and south west to Exeter & Plymouth. However, it has several strong assets and capabilities, including the nuclear developments and decommissioning at Hinkley Points A, B and C on the north coast, the Gravity Enterprise Zone just off the M5 in Sedgemoor, and the aerospace cluster centred around Yeovil.
- **Employment & Skills.** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Somerset recorded exceptionally low unemployment and high employment participation, although this was balanced by lower-than-average wages due to higher-than-average of lower-skilled jobs. The pandemic has inevitably had an impact with layoffs being seen at some local employers.
- **Anchor businesses.** Somerset is predominantly a small and medium sized enterprise (SME) economy but has some significant large anchor businesses. These include: EDF Energy at Hinkley Point; Clarks (shoes), based in Street; Screwfix and Leonardo (helicopters) in Yeovil; and the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) in Taunton.
- **Locally significant tourism.** Somerset has a significant tourist sector (for example Glastonbury Festival, Cheddar & The Mendips, Exmoor, Fleet Air Arm Museum, and the West Somerset coast) but overall tourism has a more modest impact than the rest of the south west peninsula, Dorset/south coast and the Bristol/Bath areas.

- **Transport links.** Somerset has a strong position on national transport corridors (M5, A303) and the railway lines from Exeter to London, Bristol and the Midlands. However, intra-county connections are much weaker and there is over-reliance on private cars due to the rural character of public transport and limited connectivity outside and between the major strategic corridors.
- **Environmental change.** The climate emergency declared by all five Somerset local authorities is made more immediate by the risks of flooding, sea-level rises and coastal erosion which threaten some of the major settlements – including Bridgwater.
- **Natural beauty.** Somerset has many environmental assets with a coastline, four Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 15 National Nature Reserves and Exmoor National Park. However, it is important to make sure the whole population have easy access to the benefits which nature and the natural environment can offer.
- **Housing supply.** A very high proportion of new home demand is coming from older people, but very little of the housing being built in Somerset is for this demographic. There is also a shortage of single occupancy accommodation to encourage young people to live and work in Somerset and this type of accommodation is prioritised differently by different district councils.
- **Deprivation hotspots.** In terms of the index of multiple deprivation (IMD) Somerset is similar to comparator areas and neighbours like Devon and Dorset, but this mask a number of persistent deprivation hotspots.

So, what is One Somerset offering the business community of Somerset?

As the growth and wealth creators in the county, it is vital that businesses see real value in engaging with One Somerset to make sure that a platform for a strong economy is built and that the council is seen as an enabler of job creation and economic growth.

Somerset's Growth Plan sets out a vision for sustainable and productive growth for urban neighbourhoods, "left behind" market towns and rural areas. COVID-19 has made this more important than ever – there will be a great challenge in stimulating the economy to replace jobs that have been lost because of the pandemic.

A strong unitary authority would bring together, subject to the lasting impact of COVID-19 impact:

- A stewardship of a £12 billion per annum gross value add (GVA) economy.
- A labour force of around 300,000 with a slightly lower number of local jobs
- A business base of 25-30,000 local enterprise units with the right tools to do the job.

Because of this extensive economic base, a strong unitary authority for Somerset would provide singular decision-making, strategic leadership, and one voice. This would enable strengthened relationships with regional economic development partners such as HotSW LEP, the Sub-National Transport Board, Great South West (GSW) and WECA and Western Gateway.

There are clear opportunities to embed Somerset into a sub-regional model:

- As a centre and transport node between Bristol and Exeter, Taunton & Wellington has the potential to be the South West's largest, and an exemplar, 21st century Garden Town. This would build on the nationally recognised UKHO as a catalyst for digital and big data businesses.
- A tailored place-based approach would recognise Yeovil's relatively self-contained 50,000 sub-regional centre and role as a crucial node in the Bristol-South Coast aerospace corridor with a specialism around rotorcraft.
- Bridgwater's large enterprise zone at the Gravity site, positions it well as a centre for the nuclear and low carbon supply chain for Hinkley Point C.
- Agriculture and food & drink production is the bed-rock of the Somerset economy and building upon this, the development of a cluster of Agritech businesses in the Mendips.
- Drive the "Visitor Economy" linked to the local F&D experience and established destinations such as Exmoor & Quantocks, the Coast & its accommodation providers & attractions and The City of Wells
- A recognition that the long-established logistics sector, based in the north east of the county, supports not just the aggregates industry but the food & drink sector such as Wykes, Yeo Valley, Showerings and Thatchers.
- Support the growth of new and innovative businesses in our market towns such as creative and digital clusters across the county through the growing portfolio of enterprise centres.
- Support the integration and development of Somerset's skills base (particularly of young people) bringing together funders, training providers and businesses to support a strong Somerset economy post-COVID.

A strong effective unitary authority will build a single integrated economic development service that will include the planning department with the capacity to deploy a range of specialist skills compared to generic approaches inherent when spread over five teams. This will create a unique "wrap around" service for businesses including an account management service for large employers.

The key challenge for planning is to provide the spatial basis for sustainable inclusive growth and well-being. This is proving difficult to achieve in the two-tier system as considerations that need to be assessed in the round are the responsibility of

different authorities. One unitary authority would therefore have an integrated planning service embedded in economic development – including development control, highways, minerals and waste together with critical mass to consolidate specialist professional services like ecology and landscape linked to skills and education to provide a full single service to business.

This should lead to improved management of major strategic projects and programmes and simplifying business engagement, especially for regionally significant schemes and easing business planning applications through to the point of determination in a timely manner.

Furthermore, a unitary authority for the entire Somerset will have the capacity to join up all the competing disciplines involved in effective infrastructure evidenced by the support of Highways England for the proposal.

Creating a critical mass of expertise and talent for major project delivery will provide responsive specialist services for the creation of schools, business enterprise & innovation centres and local transport schemes as well as shaping public and green transport provision.

This new approach to economic development, planning and infrastructure would be a significant step-change asset for post COVID-19 recovery, where good practice in recovery planning suggests a “whole-system” approach is needed.

So, what might this mean to my business in Somerset?

As a strong and effective unitary authority, the One Somerset proposal will provide: -

1. One voice for Somerset in strategic economic development discussions and negotiations with Government and regional partners.
2. One clear message when promoting Somerset for tourism and inward investment through Visit Somerset and Into Somerset.
3. One partnership between the new council and the business community to make sure that businesses have a channel for open communication.
4. One plan for delivering economic success across the entire county without geographic bias that is developed with influence from the business community.
5. One “Wrap Around” economic development service, inc’ planning & highways and business support to seamlessly ease businesses, with the help of an account manager, through the Council’s services.

Businesses that support the aspirations of One Somerset are invited to: -

1. Participate in the Government's consultation stating your support for One Somerset: [Somerset Unitarisation - Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Citizen Space - Citizen Space](#)
2. Alternatively, you can send a message of support direct to the following email address: onesomerset@somerset.gov.uk The One Somerset website (www.onesomerset.org.uk) provides further information about the proposal.
3. Write privately to the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick MP, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 4th Floor, Fry Building, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P or email PSRobertJenrick@communities.gov.uk expressing support for One Somerset.