

Question 5. Do the unitary councils proposed by the councils represent a credible geography?

Yes No

Disaggregating (splitting) services

Approximately 80% of local government spend in Somerset is delivered on a countywide footprint and would need to be disaggregated under Stronger Somerset's proposals. Some services would remain aggregated under the proposed Combined Authority and although it is not clear which services those would be, they would not include social care which accounts for approximately 70% of spend.

Recent work on the importance of scale in service delivery, and issues around disaggregation reached several conclusions:

- Place identity and brand are important levers in investment and disaggregation will impact investors view - nationally and internationally.
- Smaller unitary authorities do not mean they are likely to do better than larger ones. Scale and ability to manage risk are not inherently connected. Larger size (or in the case of Somerset, retaining the current footprint) does however matter in terms of ability to manage supply chains and develop capacity and safeguards.
- Smaller organisations tend to have to rely on smaller teams and there is automatic fragmentation and a greater risk of failure points. Attracting and retaining talent in a small organisation tends to be harder because opportunities for progression or peer to peer learning are limited.
- Risks to critical areas of local government include:
 - There is a shortage of appointable candidates for senior roles already in some services, not just at a director level.
 - Disaggregation adds complexity, risking disruption to critical systems including safeguarding. ○ It is difficult not to favour one unitary over another in the final structure.
 - Bringing additional parties into play can create instability in care markets.
 - Fragmented or poor strategic oversight.
- There is little evidence that large organisations are poor performers by default. In fact, disaggregation of better performing services has a detrimental impact – a definite concern considering the excellent performance of the adult social care and health system.
- In terms of the public sector's role in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic, and indeed any major incident:
 - Scale works well in a crisis. Disaggregated

services e.g. two unitaries instead of one, reduces potential to organise at pace to meet

challenges or agree ways forward, both during an incident and when planning and delivering recovery activity. ○ The impact of powers exercised by services and the value of data can be maximised in larger areas.

- Consolidated responsibility allows coordinated and swifter action with better feedback mechanisms and ability to be flexible as incidents develop and change.
- Scale allows robustness and resilience of systems generally.

Combined Authority on an inappropriate geography

The Stronger Somerset Combined Authority proposal is very high level and lacks sufficient detail for the reader to take a view on how it would, or could, deliver its stated ambitions. In seeking a devolution deal covering economic and infrastructure growth, the proposals have not explained how it will practically work with existing Government sponsored sub-regional bodies with similar responsibilities already operating across the proposed Combined Authority geography.

More fundamentally Reform Priority 4 titled "Growth" in Stronger Somerset's proposals says virtually nothing about what the two new unitaries will do to address the social, economic and environmental challenges without a Combined Authority and devolution deal which is by no means guaranteed.

- There is passing reference to Stronger Somerset's approach helping to address economic challenges more effectively but there is no detail on what that actually means. The impact of disaggregating services could in fact worsen capacity to address those challenges.
- Stronger Somerset's proposal does not explain what their approach would be if a Combined Authority is not agreed. No options appraisal of alternatives to a Combined Authority appears to have been carried out. This presents a significant unmitigated risk to the viability of Stronger Somerset.

Finally, a strong combined authority is dependent upon strong and effective local authorities and is not a replacement for such.