

## **Question 6. Do you have any other comments with regards to the proposed reorganisation of local government in each area?**

Yes  No

### **Stronger Somerset's proposals do not meet the Government's three tests**

Our overall position is that the Stronger Somerset proposals do not represent a viable, reliable or effective way forward for local government or the wider public sector in Somerset. It will not deliver the improvements or savings promised and represents a serious risk to the future wellbeing and prosperity of the residents and businesses of Somerset.

Our view is that the Stronger Somerset proposals do not meet the Government's three tests for unitary:

- 1. They are not likely to improve local government and service delivery across the area of the proposal**
  - The Stronger Somerset proposal replaces five current organisations with five new organisations, with greater levels of complexity, cost and uncertainty with no evidence of improvement for citizens or businesses. The challenges of disaggregation (breaking up services) cannot be overstated. Neither can the challenges of creating and operating a complex triple-tier system to replace the current two-tier system.
    - Tier 1: County-wide services such as the existing Somerset Waste Partnership and proposed (but not detailed) Combined Authority and Alternative Delivery Mode for children's services.
    - Tier 2: The proposed 2 new unitary authorities.
    - Tier 3: Potential devolution to town and parish councils or neighbourhoods.
  - There appears to be no mechanism or guiding mind outlined in Stronger Somerset's proposals to give the leadership and control required to implement or manage such a proposed structure. In the absence of sufficient evidence, including financial information or a robust risk assessment, we must question the viability and deliverability of the Stronger Somerset proposals.
- 2. They do not command a good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal**
  - The Stronger Somerset proposal does not command a strong level of support from public or partners, and none of the key health, police or other public sector partners offering their support. We know of no strategic or local stakeholder organisations who have declared their support for the Stronger Somerset bid.

- Three of Somerset’s MPs, and the Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner have publicly declared themselves in favour of the alternative One Somerset proposal for a single unitary authority for Somerset.
3. **The area of the new unitary councils is not a credible geography with an aggregate population which is either within the range 300,000 to 600,000, or such other figure that, having regard to the circumstances of the authority, including local identity and geography could be considered substantial**
- Stronger Somerset proposes to create two unitaries, each with approximately 280,000 population. This is below the Government’s threshold of 300,000 population for a financially viable unitary authority. Although we appreciate that sub-300,000 populations can be acceptable if justified, we do not believe Stronger Somerset’s proposals provide that justification. Instead of making a credible argument for sub-300,000 populations in each proposed authority, a projection of population growth is used to suggest that the test will be met after ten years. Nor do we agree that the geographical, community, demographic split supports a two-unitary approach: county-wide place-based services cannot be successfully split up. For example, breaking apart the Adult Social Care and Health system in Somerset will seriously jeopardize outcomes for residents.
  - The experience of unitarisation in Buckinghamshire – a population of 650,000, mix of rural and urban, with 4 district councils has parallels with Somerset as a place and has been deemed to be very suited to a single unitary authority.
  - Splitting the county into two as proposed would create a western Somerset unitary authority with lower Council Tax income yet higher service demand than the eastern unitary. This would therefore create tensions between east and west Somerset as the added complexity would adversely affect joint working, strategic working, budget setting and would limit achievement of economic and social objectives such as the Levelling-Up agenda.
  - We believe that Stronger Somerset sets out too many poorly thought-out objectives, leading to a confused set of proposals that are insufficiently evidenced. It is therefore difficult to see a consistent and easily understood “golden thread” of intent between the four, high-level vision ambitions, the various reform objectives, and the high-level proposals for change.