

CHALLENGES DO NOT RESPECT BOUNDARIES – WHY WE NEED ONE VISION, ONE STRATEGY & ONE VOICE; SENIOR PRACTITIONERS EXPLAIN WHY SOMERSET NEEDS A SINGLE COUNCIL APPROACH

Having absolute clarity with one vision, one strategy and one voice would allow Somerset to better tackle major future challenges and is the key reason why senior professionals with statutory responsibility for Somerset's health and economic wellbeing who have spent the last year leading the battle against Covid believe a single unitary authority for Somerset is the best option for the future of the county.

The call comes as the Government currently consults on two possible options for the future of local government in Somerset. Somerset County Council's (SCC) proposal called, One Somerset, that would see the four district councils and the county council replaced with a single new unitary authority replacing five existing councils with one new organisation. And, the district councils' proposal, Stronger Somerset, that would replace Somerset's existing five councils with two new unitary authorities in the east and west of the county, a separate children's services or Alternative Delivery Model, a shared services company, and a combined authority for the area. So, replacing five existing councils with five new organisations.

Lessons from Covid

Somerset's Public Health Director, Trudi Grant, who alongside the NHS has spent the last year leading efforts to tackle the Covid pandemic, and Michele Cusack, the county's Director of Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning were commenting from their experiences of the last year and in dealing with partners in both the public and private sectors. They further stressed that events of the last year had clearly shown that key challenges facing the county, whether the climate emergency or tackling a pandemic, did not respect artificial boundaries and the future structure of local government in the county needed to reflect this.

Trudi said, "To tackle many of the deep rooted social and environmental issues that impact on all our lives in Somerset, we have to adopt a joined-up vision for our County, something that everyone can get behind, something that everyone can work towards and something that we can all advocate for at a national level, one strong voice".

She continued, "For both improving health and wellbeing and tackling the climate emergency the importance of a signed up long term vision cannot be underestimated. Urgent issues often crowd out important long-term issues. With so many pressing issues to deal with, focus needs to be given to the longer-term problems by having a strong vision for the county, and one strong voice behind it."

Michele commented, "One council for Somerset would provide far greater resilience and stability to tackle the challenges we face in our economy, in our environment including climate change and in the health of our residents, particularly, as we recover from the pandemic. A single council would allow us to have one strategy and one approach to take forward strategic action to better deliver this resilience and tackle these three areas as one. And we know these challenges do not respect artificial boundaries or constructs."

They further commented: "Creating multiple separate organisations would fail to learn the lessons from the last year, of having one clear vision, one clear strategy with actions to match. Such an approach would create rivals, each with their own priorities, unable to bring focus on the key challenges we face and each competing for the same share of the pie particularly when it comes to government funding. Two councils would also fail to deliver the strong voice and leadership needed

for our county to tackle the most pressing challenges we face including attracting new investment and new jobs alongside the necessary infrastructure that's required."

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