

Somerset needs more local democracy, not less

Background

Now is not the time for forced changes to Local Government in Somerset. The Green Party recognises that the financial ‘burning platform’ was lit by incompetent Conservative management of Somerset County Council (SCC), fanned by escalating central Government underfunding since 2010. However, forecast savings from Unitarisation are modest, would take years to deliver, and experience elsewhere teaches us that these may of course never materialise. Local democracy and resilience are good reasons to re-organise Local Government. Financial deficits are not.

There are bigger burning platforms. Somerset County Council and all four Districts declared a Climate Emergency between February and May 2019. If we believe we are facing an Emergency – and *we do!* – then this Emergency should drive the design of Local Government to help face it. Resilience should be at its heart. The Climate Emergency was not cured by Coronavirus; yet it stopped Somerset Councils’ work on it. Whereas behind the scenes work on the *“One Somerset”* proposal continued...

... In this context, we welcome the District Councils pulling their heads out of the sand with more credible, and resilient, *“Stronger Somerset”* proposals of East and West twin Unitary Councils. Somerset is too big to be governed by one sole Council in Taunton – nearly sixty miles from Frome. Somerset is also too small on some levels, with former County Council responsibilities such as strategic transport now passed upwards to the *“Heart of the South West”* Local Enterprise Partnership (including Devon), *“Peninsula Transport”* (also including Cornwall), and potentially also a Combined Authority (or *“Great South West”* ‘Powerhouse’) in the future. These larger tiers must also be made more democratic. Locally elected leadership will deliver better outcomes for Somerset than Westminster diktat.

Real Devolution to Communities

Both the *“One Somerset”* and *“Stronger Somerset”* Business Cases claim to have adopted the seven Recommendations on the Role of Town and Parish Councils from Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) and the Somerset Branch of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC): objectives such as local ownership and devolution, localisation of services, local democratic governance, and local presence. Yet, experience in Wiltshire and Dorset has been that initial warm words have not been followed by real delivery of *“devolution”*.

Much collective and co-operative hard work would be required, in a genuine spirit of trust and partnership, if these positive ambitions are to be realised. To build resilience from the heart of our local democracy, and guard against prevent cultural centralisation, we recommend that...

- Town & Parish community ‘hubs’ (in whatever form) are hosted by SALC, not hidden within whichever central Council Hall(s) is/are chosen;
- Towns & Parishes are trusted with voting powers on any local community hubs;
- Long-term funding of this support is agreed from the start.

Resilient Care

This year's Coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on how stressed Somerset's care services have become. The challenge for the provision of social care is a national one, and needs to be addressed by a review of funding some of which may need to be driven locally. As a consequence of austerity and certainly SCC cuts, preventative services, which are the cornerstone of any improvement, have been dramatically reduced. A renewed effort needs to take place to fund preventative services that have proven to reduce spending and demand. This is the key to addressing adult and children's social care needs and future growth particularly around older people's care at home, residential and nursing care.

Resilience to the Climate Emergency

Our Climate Emergency is referenced throughout both *"One Somerset"* and *"Stronger Somerset"* but greater ambition is required if we are to deliver a Carbon Neutral Somerset within this decade... Somerset's delayed Climate Emergency Strategy will be launched on 25 September. Iteration will inevitably be needed to strengthen this, which must happen in parallel to building democratic resilience into the heart of our plans.

Resilient Democracy

If Somerset's Local Governance is to become genuinely inclusive and innovative, we must not let our local horizons be hemmed in. The Government will launch its *"Devolution and Recovery"* White Paper during the Autumn. Somerset must be brave enough to demand that *our* devolution is democratic enough to be elected by a proportionate voting system. The last ten years has proved that First Past the Post certainly does not deliver *"strong Government"* – better decisions are made by consensus. If 'Additional Members' are good enough for Boris in the London Assembly, or the new Welsh Senedd, why should Somerset accept anything less than a 21st Century democracy?

South Somerset Green Party

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