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**Please ask
for:**

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Date:

3 October 2024

Dear Alison

LGBCE Electoral Review for Somerset Council – council size submission

I am writing to confirm that Somerset Council agreed its council size submission at its meeting on Thursday 26 September and this is attached for your review.

You will be aware that Somerset Council was established in April 2023 as a result of the Somerset Structural Changes Order 2022. The council comprises 110 councillors and they were elected on the basis of 2 councillors representing each of the 55 electoral divisions within Somerset.

Following consultation with the political group leaders and senior officers, the Council has concluded that Somerset Council should reduce the number of councillors from 110 to 96 councillors by the 2027 elections. This would mean each councillor would represent an average of 4,626 electors based on the current electorate. Somerset's projected electorate for 2029 is 467,403 which would mean an average of 4,868 for the 96 councillors. This is a significant increase from the current average of 4,037 electors per councillor.

We feel that in our infancy as a Council, this number will allow us to effectively represent communities, deliver council business and provide efficient governance. We have also reviewed the council sizes, governance arrangements and last electoral reviews of our peer councils such as Wiltshire Council (a neighbouring unitary council) and Buckinghamshire Council. We share commonalities with these councils and our council size submission is on a par with those councils.

During the consideration of the Council's size, Members have also indicated a preference to change the electoral divisions to 'Wards' rather than 'Divisions'. This change would also likely be welcomed by the public, some of whom are confused with the difference in terminology and generally prefer the term 'Wards'.

The current council size of 110 Members was established through the Somerset Structural Changes Order 2022 and in truth was a number of convenience by simply doubling up the number of Councillors to the previous Somerset County Council divisions. It was therefore always accepted that a reduction in Councillor numbers would be optimal.

A large Council carries a significant governance overhead. Complex governance creates challenges, which require Member and Officer resource to manage. In order to ensure Members, who have been elected by their local communities, have sufficient and appropriate opportunity to engage effectively in council decision making, larger numbers of Committees, with larger numbers of Members on each, are required. Larger committee sizes can also make effective decision making more challenging.

Furthermore, with only limited opportunities for Members to engage in Committees there is a risk that the incorrect channels are used in an effort to promote individual priorities or agendas.

In addition good governance requires effective scrutiny. A large Council, serviced by many Committees, requires a substantial Scrutiny function. A smaller Council Size would therefore enable a more streamlined and effective Scrutiny function.

It is essential that each Councillor serves roughly the same number of electors (electoral equality), and that local people know who their Councillor is when needed. Having too many councillors can make it more challenging both for Councillors to represent their communities, and for local people to know who is representing them.

Somerset is a County of contrasts with densely populated urban areas in our market towns and sparsely populated rural areas. Rural wards are often most effective if represented by a single member. This reduces the geographic size of wards, reducing the number of parishes within each (thus reducing the need for attendance at multiple parish and parish council meetings). It helps establish a stronger link between rural communities and their Councillor and removes confusion about roles, responsibilities and representation.

A large Council can result in challenges in Group management for all Group Leaders. Somerset is currently a very big authority area, with representatives from each Group spread across the wide and diverse geographic area. The challenge of ensuring they have effective opportunities to represent their electorate, and in ensuring appropriate cross-authority support and interaction between colleagues. In times such as we are experiencing now with Somerset Council's ongoing financial emergency political stability is very important as many of the challenges we face require significant time and focus to address.

Hopefully the foregoing demonstrates that while a reduction in Council size is appropriate we have also assessed whether or not a reduction of 13% goes far enough. We have considered if a deeper reduction in Councillor numbers to a figure in the 70s or 80s would also achieve the outcomes we are seeking. However, we have concluded that a reduction in Councillor numbers in the region of 30% would tip the balance.

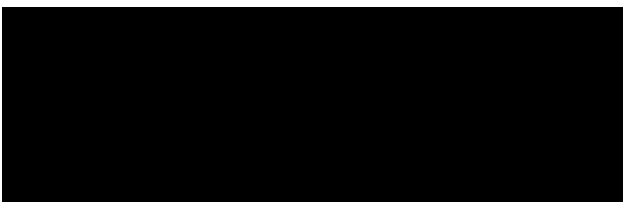
It is important to note that there is a theoretical minimum size of council, below which it is not possible to function effectively. As an authority, that is very much still in its infancy, we do not believe there is currently enough corporate and democratic capacity to accommodate such a reduction. Average electorate numbers per member would rise to over 5500 on current numbers and above 6600 on 2029 projections if a c.30% reduction were to be implemented. If those numbers are applied to our more rural wards Councillors would have significantly large geographical areas to cover containing multiple Parish Councils and Parish Meetings thereby weakening the links and relationships that we have worked hard to establish since vesting day. Therefore, we have concluded that a reduction to 96 is the correct number for the Council that is currently less than 2 years into its life.

The Council welcomes the opportunity to inform the design of ward boundaries in LGBCE's next stage of the review. Wherever possible, there is a preference for predominantly single member wards to ensure that there is clear accountability for local communities, as set out in the Unitary Business Case. However, we recognise that one size does not fit all and there would be circumstances where multi-member wards may be more appropriate.

Further supporting information will be provided by email in support of the Council's submission. You will appreciate the level of interest from our councillors, and I would welcome your notification of when the next stage of the review will commence and the overall timetable for the review.

Please come back to me or my colleague Alyn Jones, Executive Director – Resources, Strategy & Transformation, if you have any questions or require anything further at this stage.

Yours sincerely



David Clark

Service Director Governance, Democratic & Legal and Monitoring Officer
cc. political group leaders

Alyn Jones – Executive Director for Resources, Strategy & Transformation

Somerset Council

Council Size Submission



Somerset
Council

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Foreword, by Cllr Bill Revans, Leader of Somerset Council

We are very pleased to be offered this opportunity to advise the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on our assessment of the right number of Councillors we need to effectively represent communities, deliver council business and provide efficient governance in Somerset.



Our current electoral arrangements were imposed by the Structural Changes Order which initially created our council on 1 April 2023. While they have served us well, we very much welcome this process and the chance it provides to make further positive change.

Members have worked together across the political parties to prepare our draft submission, which looks at all aspects of this review and its potential impact on our council and our communities. Working together, we have examined a range of factors, including things like the need for effective governance requirements, robust scrutiny and effective community leadership.

Somerset is a great place to live, with wonderful countryside, heritage, leisure opportunities, and many strong established businesses. Our Commitment is to work with the residents of Somerset and our partners to protect our environment, meet residents' needs for homes and jobs, and ensure that everyone can live well and safely together.

Above all, Somerset must be a place where everyone thrives, and we very much recognise the importance of good governance in achieving those aims.

Councillor Bill Revans
Leader of Somerset Council

About the Council

This submission is made on behalf of Somerset Council. The summary and conclusion has been reached by broad consensus across the political groups and represents a collective view.

Reason for Review

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has identified that this review needs to be conducted as a result of Local Government Reorganisation. Somerset Council became the unitary council for the areas previously covered by Mendip District Council, South Somerset District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset West and Taunton Council and Somerset County Council.

The current council size and boundary pattern were dictated by the Structural Changes Order 2022 and reflected the division boundaries of the former Somerset County Council.

Somerset Council came into being on 1 April 2023. As part of the process of Local Government Reorganisation there was a commitment that a Local Government Boundary Commission for England Review would be undertaken in advance of the next scheduled Somerset Council elections in 2027.

The Context for the Proposal

Somerset Council is a new unitary council arising from Local Government Reorganisation. It was established on 1 April 2023. Before that it had been made up of Somerset County Council, and four District Councils. The former Somerset County Council had 55 Divisions. In order to set up a working Council at pace the Government agreed a Structural Change Order which established Somerset Council to retain the former County Council Division boundaries but with double the representation. The current Somerset Council therefore has 110 Members. Elections to Somerset Council were last held in May 2022.

In the November 2023, the Council announced a financial emergency. There is still a need to maintain financial discipline which may result in a review of the overall governance.

However, Somerset Council is in its early stages and the arrangement that we have in place are those that have been established and have been operational since its inception and there are no immediate plans to change those governance arrangements.

Local Authority Profile

The new council is one of the largest unitaries in the UK, currently with a 5,000-strong workforce and a gross budget of £1bn, covering a population of over 560,000. It has 110 elected councillors and has a majority Liberal Democrats political group leadership.

Somerset has a rural charm and character with four Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the stunning Exmoor National Park, and an exceptional food and farming industry producing some of Britain's highest quality produce. Wells Cathedral is arguably the most beautiful in the UK while other attractions include Bridgwater Carnival, the world's largest illuminated procession, and Glastonbury Festival, which becomes the UK's biggest pop-up city for five days each year. Community spirit is strong, particularly in the county's market towns and villages, making it one of the best places to live in the UK.

There are also some major challenges. Climate change is a real threat to the county and effecting change in a geographically spread rural area is a very different proposition to city-based solutions. Much of the coast in the county is at risk from rising sea levels while the dramatic flooding of the Somerset Levels in 2014 left some communities cut off for weeks and made headlines around the globe.

Since then, the county has delivered an innovative road-raising engineering scheme and an ambitious £230m project to build a flood barrier across the River Parrett at Bridgwater is being progressed (one of Britain's largest flood defences, when complete). Somerset councils were assessed by Climate Emergency UK as being amongst the greenest in the UK, with the (previous) Somerset West and Taunton Council, top-rated nationally.

Other challenges are typical of rural communities. High levels of employment hide how much work is seasonal and poorly paid. The lack of a university in the County leads many young people to leave the county to complete their education. But Somerset is hitting back by adopting a 'grow your own policy' with innovative, ambitious and successful approaches to degree and apprenticeship programmes for its future workforce.

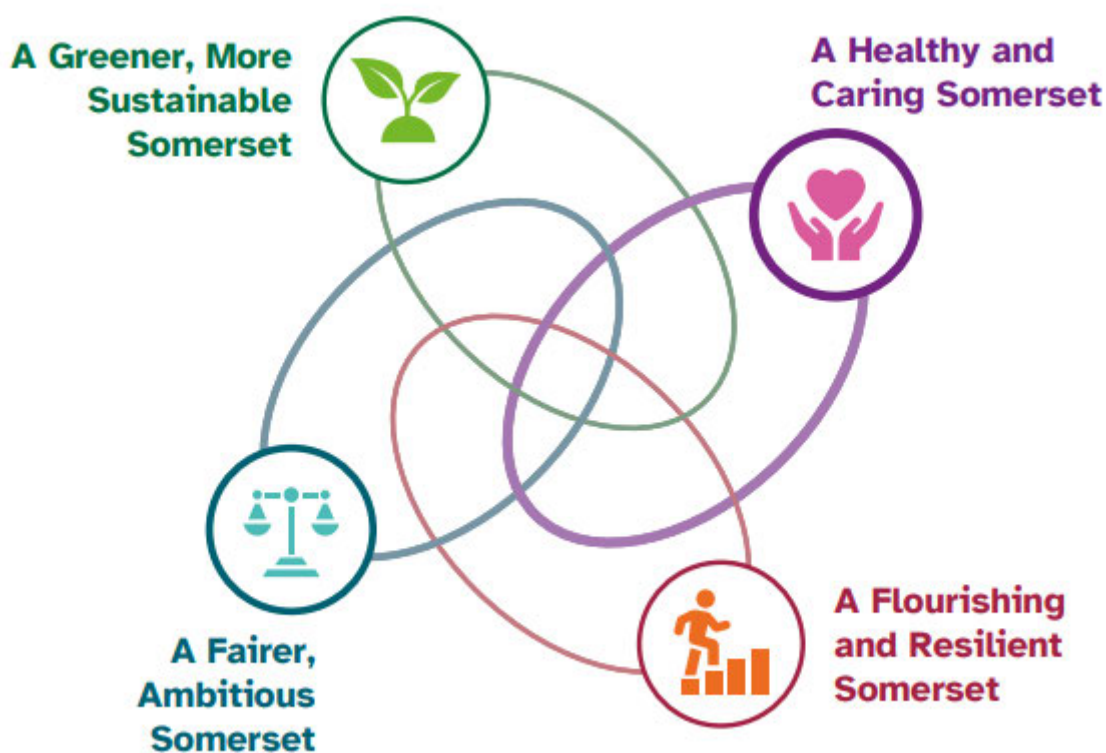
Raising productivity by improving the education and skills pipeline from the early years through to adulthood is a critical task for the new council but there is much to build on. The new reactors being built at Hinkley Point C are currently Europe's largest construction project, with a thriving local supply chain. Our low-carbon energy sector means we are also a home to the National College for Nuclear, which will grow in significance and impact alongside the government's energy strategy. Somerset Council is investing in digital innovation in Taunton, building on the success of the Hydrographic Office, and has just opened the ground-breaking iAero centre in Yeovil, created as a centre for green aviation. We developed the centre in partnership with local but international helicopter manufacturer Leonardo. Meanwhile, our Enterprise Zone, the Gravity Smart Campus near Bridgwater is set to create up to 7,500 jobs as a centre for clean growth and innovation. We have a highly skilled and motivated workforce developing truly local services, providing support for our residents and businesses with one single strong voice for Somerset.

Strategic Leadership

It should be noted the Somerset Council is in its “infancy”. Therefore, the governance framework and arrangements created in April 2023 are still considered by this Council as the best structure to meet the needs of the Council and the communities it serves.

We set out our vision and priorities in our [Council Plan 2023-2027](#). Our vision is *to build a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable and listens* to our residents, businesses and partners. We developed four priorities to make our vision clearer and more meaningful. These priorities are our way of explaining what is important for us to focus on while we are transforming our new Council, while we are delivering our services, and while we are planning how to improve those services.

These priorities are:

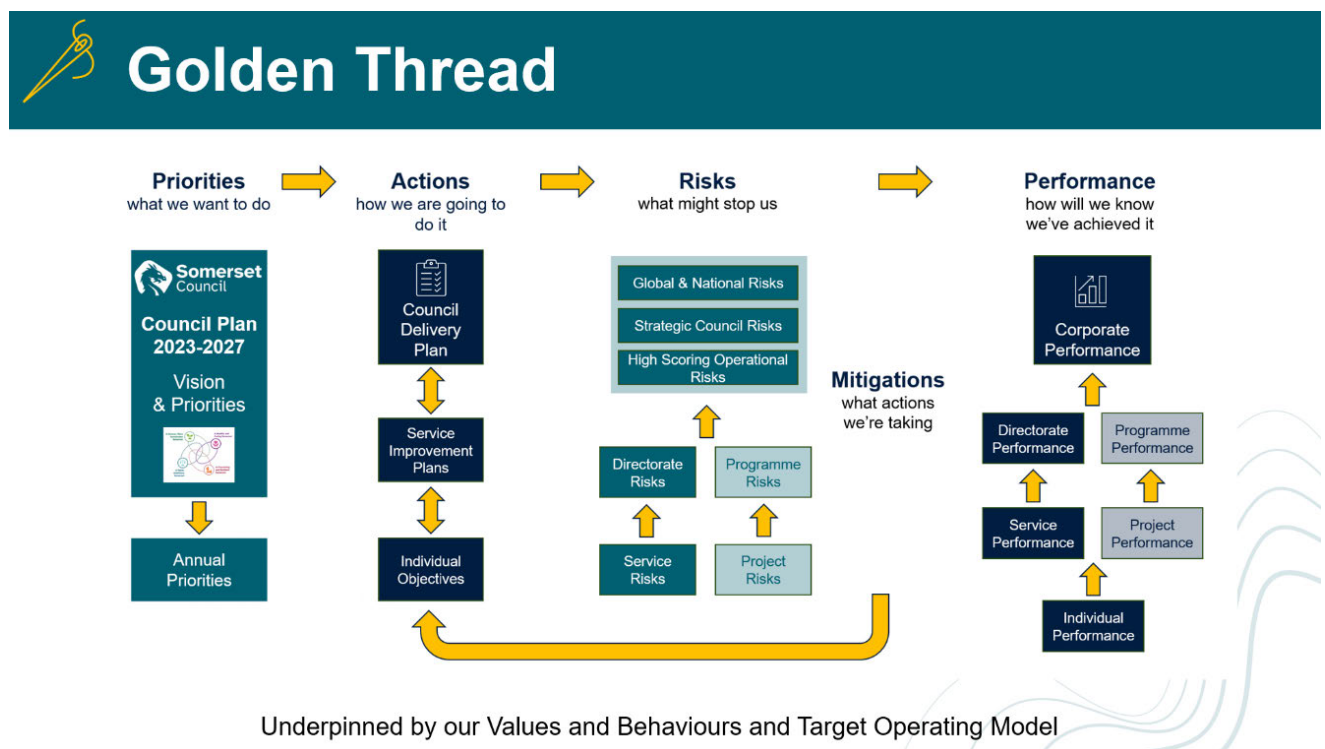


As a new Unitary Council, we are committed to providing the services, projects and policies that ensure we have a county that is aspirational, dynamic and that we deliver on our promises.

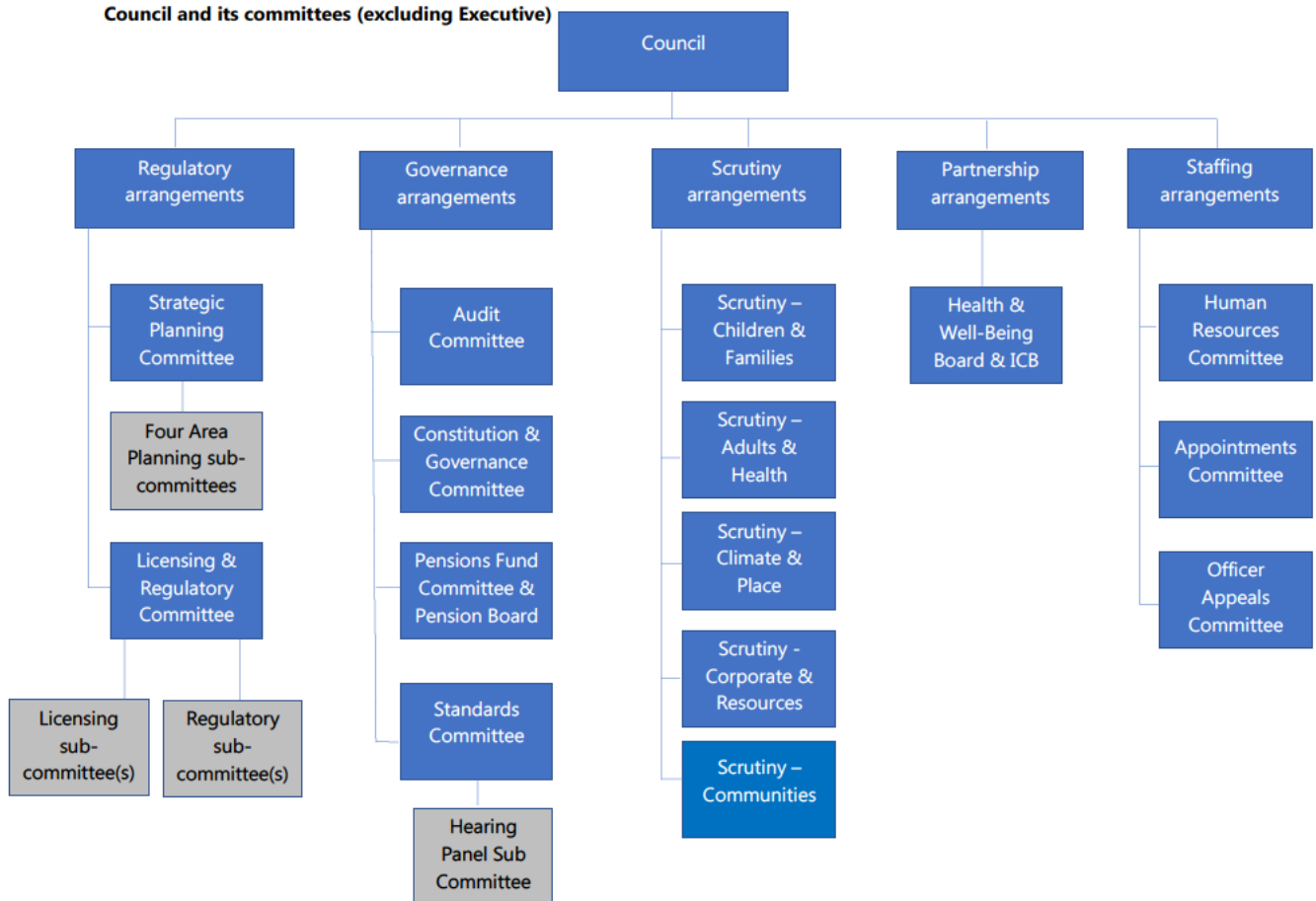
By bringing together our collective assets, experience and skills, we are better placed to make real difference to our residents and communities, from social housing to active travel.

But, like many other councils, Somerset Council faces an extremely challenging financial position with the cost of delivering services increasing significantly faster than the income received. The new Council came into existence at the most challenging time for local government in a generation. Fourteen years of austerity and growing demand has reduced the spending power and financial flexibility of all councils. The cost of delivering services has dramatically increased due to rising energy costs, rising interest rates, rising costs of care, and increasing numbers of people who need the Council's support.

Our Golden Thread sets out what we want to deliver (our priorities), the actions we will take (our Council Delivery Plan, Service Improvement Plans, and individual objectives), what might get in the way (our key risks) and how we will know we have delivered (our performance). This is all underpinned by our Values and Behaviours, Target Operating Model and Governance Framework.



Council and its committees (excluding Executive)



Governance Model:

Somerset Council has a Leader and Cabinet governance model (Cabinet to be known locally as the Executive). Our Executive has 9 members (including the Leader of the Council) and its functions are set out here: [Part E1 - Executive.pdf \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

The Executive meets regularly throughout the year and in venues across Somerset to enable local participation.

Somerset Council High Level Officer Governance (implementation in phases) alongside Democratic Governance Framework

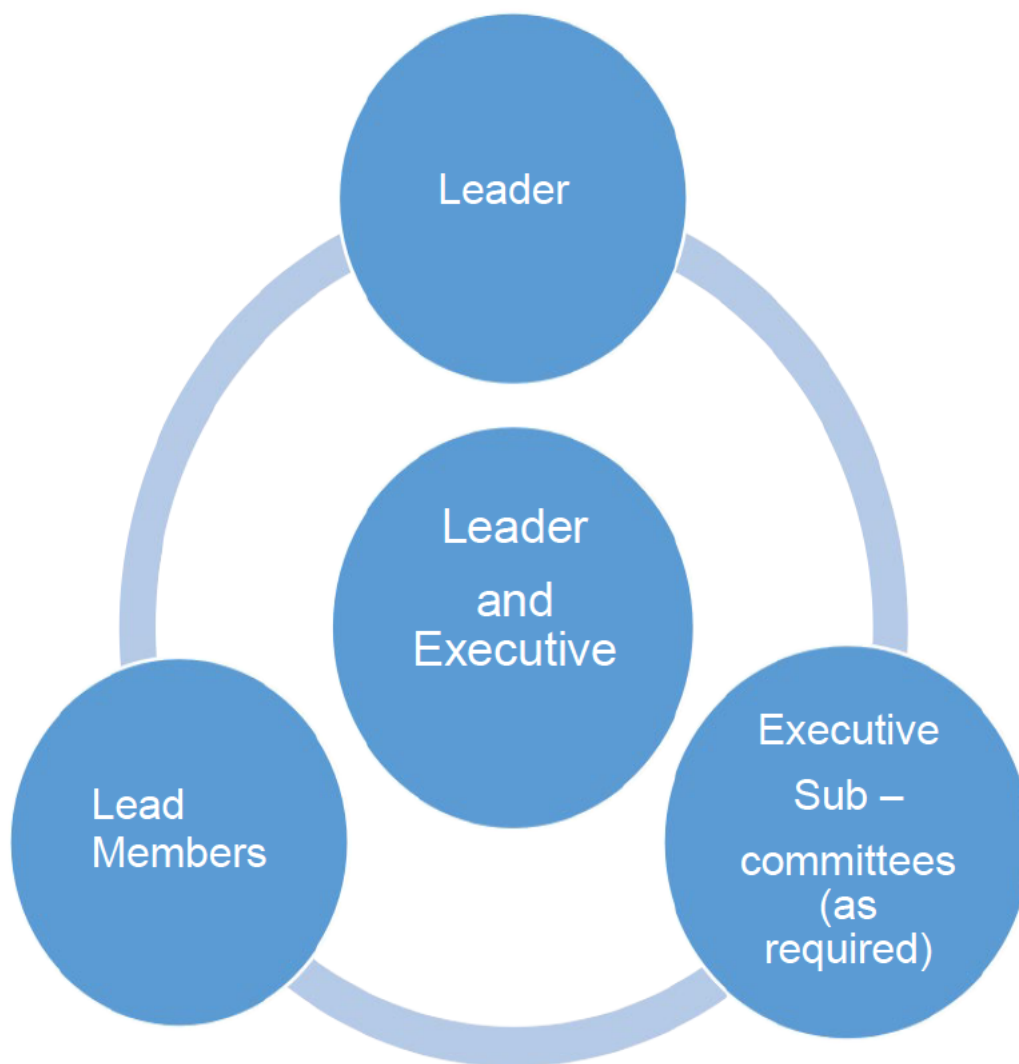


Portfolios:

Each of the 9 members (Lead Members) of the Executive has areas of responsibility (portfolio). The Executive portfolios are:

- Adult Services, Housing and Homelessness
- Children, Families and Education
- Communities, Housing Revenue Account, Culture and Equalities & Diversity
- Economic Development, Planning & Assets
- Finance, Procurement and Performance
- Governance and Communications
- Public Health, Climate Change and Environment
- Transformation, Human Resources, Localities and Digital
- Transport and Waste Services

The Lead Member for each Portfolio should be considered as a full-time position. The responsibilities for the position are set out in this document: [Part E1 - Executive.pdf \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)



Delegated Responsibilities:

All functions of the Council are delegated to Officers, except those decisions that are specified as Member Decisions in the Terms of Reference of the Full Council, a Committee or the Executive, or which by law have to be made by Members. This is set out here: [Part I2 - Officer Scheme of Delegation.pdf \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

Key Decisions are taken by either the Executive collectively, by a Lead Member or by an Officer.

Accountability

The Council's full Constitution is available here: [Agenda for Somerset Council Constitution on Wednesday, 22nd May, 2024 - Modern Council](#), this sets how the Council is run, how decisions are made and how it complies with the law.

Overview and Scrutiny functions:

Somerset Council has five scrutiny committees, namely:

- Adults and Health
- Children and Families
- Climate and Place
- Communities
- Corporate and Resources

The functions and role of these committees is set out in the Council's Constitution in: [Part G - Scrutiny \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

The five committees meet regularly throughout the year and in venues across Somerset to enable local participation.

These arrangements were reconfirmed at the Council's Annual General Meeting on 22 May 2024.

Regulatory and Statutory Functions:

Planning: The Council has appointed one Strategic Planning Committee covering the county of Somerset and four area based Planning Committees.

The Terms of Reference for the five planning committees are set out in the Council's Constitution: [Part D8 - Planning Committees Terms of Reference \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

The five committees meet regularly throughout the year and in venues across Somerset to enable local participation.

Licensing:

The Council established a Licensing and Regulatory Committee to exercise the Council's responsibilities and functions relating to licensing, conduct hearings and make determinations in respect of the Council's regulatory licensing functions.

Meanwhile Regulatory Sub committees and Licensing Sub Committees are established to conduct hearing to make determinations in respect of the Council's regulatory licensing function and the Council's licensing functions. These sub-committees meet regularly throughout the year and in venues across Somerset to enable local participation.

The Terms are set out here: [Part D4 - Licensing and Regulatory Committee Terms of Reference \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

External Partnerships:

Somerset Council has several Joint Committees, namely, The Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel, the Five Councils Partnership Corporate Services Joint Committee and Somerset Board (which includes the Integrated Care Partnership).

Joint arrangements include the Somerset Rivers Authority and the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)

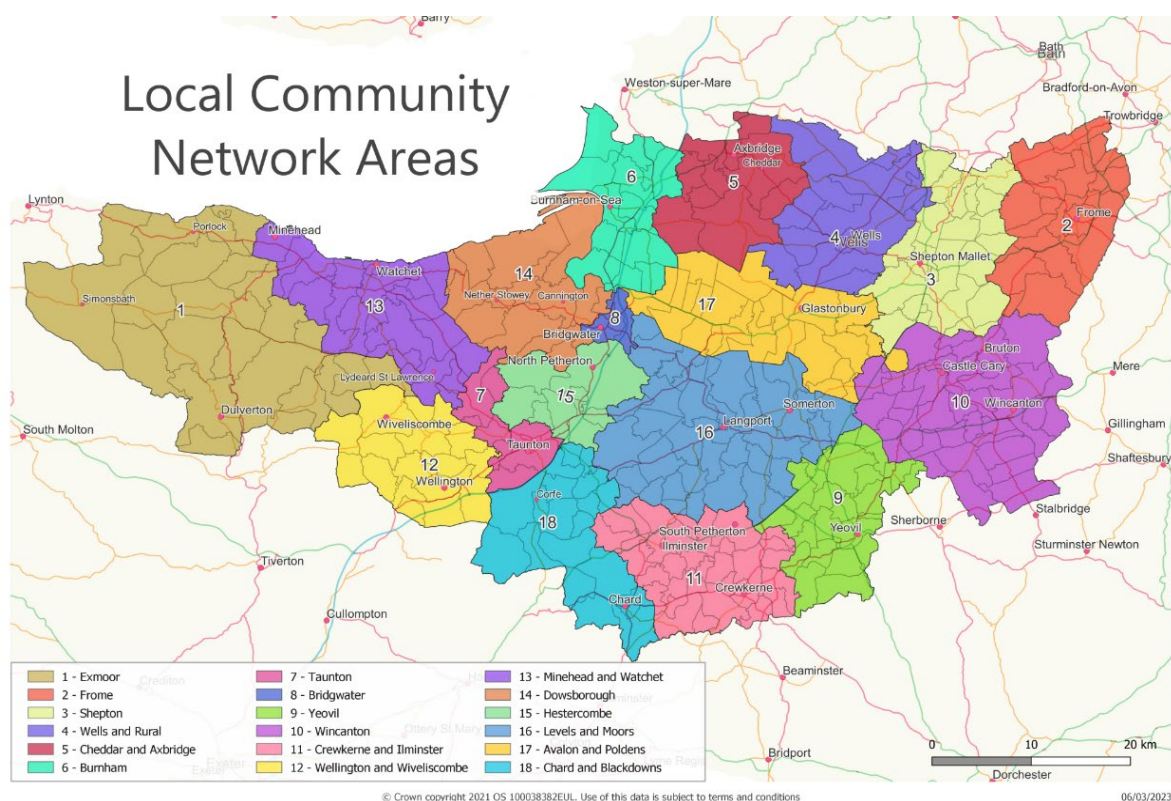
Details can be found here: [Part F - Joint Arrangements \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

In addition to this the Council appoints representatives to over 150 Outside Bodies to support the delivery of the Council Plan priorities. Details found here: [Outside bodies - Modern Council \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

Community Leadership

Leadership:

Somerset Council has established 18 Local Community Networks covering the whole of Somerset. The Terms of Reference are available here: [Somerset LCNs Draft Terms of Reference](#) (subject to change 1 March 2024). Since the financial emergency was announced in October 2023 the LCNs have been considering in partnership whether any services or assets can be devolved. The 18 LCNs meet regularly throughout the year and in venues across Somerset to enable local participation.



Member role descriptions for our 110 councillors have been adopted by the Council and are available here: [Part H1 - Roles of Members' and Office Holders \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

From time-to-time Councillors get involved in Political Awareness Sessions with young people to promote local democracy. In the Spring Term 2024 Councillors Lee Baker and Tom Deakin will visit year 11 students at Pyrland School, Taunton, to engage with the students there.

Somerset prides itself in its local democracy and compared to most peer councils it has a high number of city, town and parish councils in England. There are 279 city, town and parish councils (plus a number of parish meeting) in the Somerset Council area. Somerset Council councillors regularly engage with these local councils. In addition, the Council liaises with Parish Clerks directly every fortnight via regular City, Town and Parish Council Working Group.

Casework:

The approach to casework varies with different Councillors.

Councillors have a dedicated Democratic Services Team including a Member Support Service.

- Support includes regular member briefings
- Frequent Newsletter updates
- A dedicated Member Resource Site on SharePoint to support training and development
- ModGov (committee management, decisions and agenda publication)
- Intranet pages
- Expenses, as set out here: [Part H4 - Scheme of Members Allowances 2023-24.pdf \(someset.gov.uk\)](#)
- Equipment, each Councillor receives a surface pro tablet
- Free parking in the Councils car parks across the county for council business use
- Business Cards to promote local participation and engagement
- Access Cards to the Council's five council offices across Somerset

Other Issues

It should be noted that the Somerset Council declared a financial emergency in November 2023. It is therefore going through a period of improvement and transformation and has recently submitted its Productivity Plan and Improvement Plan to MHCLG.

Electorate analysis

This table illustrates Somerset's current and projected electorate.

	2024	2029
Somerset	444,093	467,403

The current average number of electors per Somerset Council councillor is 4,037 electors per councillor.

This table compares Somerset Council's average number of electors per councillor with peer unitary councils:

Unitary Council	Electorate	Number of Councillors	Average electors per councillor
Buckinghamshire*	415,196	147	2,825
Cornwall	434,438	87	4,994
North Yorkshire	483,617	90	5,374
Somerset	444,093	110	4,037
Wiltshire	382,258	98	3,901

Source – Office for National Statistics December 2023

* Buckinghamshire council due to reduce to 97 councillors in May 2025 which will revise the average number of electors per councillor to 4,280

Summary and Conclusion

Following consultation with the political group leaders and senior officers, the Council has concluded that Somerset Council should reduce the number of councillors from 110 to 96 councillors by the 2027 elections. This would mean each Councillor would represent an average of 4,626 electors based on the current electorate. Somerset's projected electorate for 2029 is 467,403 which would mean an average of 4,868 for the 96 councillors. This is a significant increase from the current average of 4,037 electors per councillor.

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The Council welcomes the opportunity to inform the design of ward boundaries in LGBCE's next stage of the review. Wherever possible, there is a preference for predominantly single member wards to ensure that there is clear accountability for local communities, as set out in the Unitary Business Case. However, we recognise that one size does not fit all and there would be circumstances where multi-member wards may be more appropriate.

Contact Officers:

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