

Local Government Reorganisation for new Councillors

LGA Webinar
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Somerset
Council

Liz Leyshon

Deputy Leader, Somerset Council

- 31 years working in public sector, arts manager for 24 years within Further Education College
- Experience of local authority accounting
- Big turnover and no profit fully understood in the arts
- Elected to SCC in 2017, Opp Spokesperson for Resources through financial crisis of 2017/18
- Elected to Mendip District Council in 2019, Cabinet Member for Corporate Resources & Projects
- Elected to Somerset Council in 2022. Deputy Leader & LM for Resources, Procurement & Performance
- Somerset Council Vesting April 2023
- Financial Emergency November 2023

Theatre News

Cuts: Support for the Arts to be Culled in Somerset?

Simon Cole | London | 28 October 2010

Somerset Councillors are meeting on November 1 to agree a plan to cut the county's £159K arts grants budget completely. If passed, several major arts bodies will suffer. Among them, the Brewhouse, Taunton, Bridgewater Arts Centre, the Black Swan and Merlin Theatre in Frome, Somerset Film and Video Project, Somerset Arts Weeks, SPAEDA (the arts education development group), Strode Theatre in Street, rural arts agency Take Art, and participatory arts groups Action Track.

1 County Council + 4 District Councils = Somerset Council



- Unitary since 1st April 2023
- Formerly one County Council and four District Councils
- BaNES and North Somerset (formerly Avon) are separate Unitary Councils but part of Ceremonial Somerset

2023 was not the best time for Local Government Reorganisation

Background in Somerset and elsewhere

- Austerity – stripping away financial resilience
- Increasing demand in Adults and Children's services, greater expectation, increasing costs
- Covid-19 and lockdowns. Covid grants masked issues
- Inflation in double digits
- Interest rate increases
- Low Council Tax base and rate in Somerset
- Cost and workload from 2019 intention to Vesting
- Heavy workload for some Cllrs across eg County & District and Parish/Town too

4. The [Somerset \(Structural Changes\) Order 2022](#), which came into force on 18 March 2022, establishes a single unitary council in Somerset from 1 April 2023, which is a continuing authority of the county council, that is the body corporate of the existing county council with a new name and new membership. The Order provides for:

- the abolition of the district councils in Somerset,
- transitional arrangements for implementing the structural changes, and
- elections to the new unitary council, in transitional form, in May 2022.

The district councils in Somerset remain responsible for delivering their respective functions until 1 April 2023 when the unitary council takes on the role of providing both county and district services

You'll need to be able to answer these questions

LGR – will you have Election before OR after Vesting	?
Has control of the Council(s) changed	?
Will you be working from an inherited business case or yours	?
Did you campaign for or against LGR, or for different boundaries	?
New Division/Ward boundaries and number of elected Members	?
Does your Manifesto differ significantly from the Business Case	?
Continuing Council or new Council boundaries (Somerset CC continuing)	?
Are there any outsourced services in existing Councils	?
Structural Changes Order, what is included, Section 24 responsibility	?

What worked well for Somerset?

Election before Vesting - 11 months work on the new Manifesto	Depends on Govt
LGR Implementation Board & LGR Scrutiny (to some extent)	Local Decisions
Continuing Council position (although there are many views)	Depends on Govt
Brought together Leaders from three Districts and County opposition	Depends on Election
Constitution and Governance Committee undertook new Constitution	Experienced Chair
Council Tax harmonisation relatively easy as little difference	Depends on local history
Council Tax Reduction Scheme had a good precedent from one District	Local Decision
Waste collection & disposal had been a partnership	Historical

What did we have to live with and work with?

Loss of key officers and corporate memory before and after Vesting	Inevitable, and sad
Differing priorities from predecessor Councils eg Capital programme	Local decisions
Different software systems eg Finance, Revs & Bens, Planning	Historical factors
Low Council Tax in Somerset, ageing population, very rural county	Remains
A feeling that the continuing authority's culture would continue	Still a factor
Continuing authority's Ts & Cs and pay grades lower than Districts	Work continues
Lack of zero budgeting over previous years + external factors led to a new reality and financial emergency	Internal & external factors
No clear Establishment cost for the staffing of all five Councils	

Where did we have to make decisions quickly?

Strong Leader or Committee model	Govt decision
Name of Council, logo, branding, speed of roll out	Low spend
Appointment of new CEO and then Senior Leadership Team	Complete
Number and make up of Committees inc Chairs and Vice Chairs	Work continues
250+ Outside Bodies & Partnerships to be rationalised	Work continues
Budget Working Group drawn from across five Councils	Budget for first year
Review of Reserves, Borrowing, Outturns, Commercial Investments	Work continues
Service alignment, particularly District services, inc Licensing	Work continues

What could we have done better? (personal opinions)

Better understanding of Capital priorities and funding vs borrowing	Local decisions
One S151 officer, should have retained two Deputy S151s	Local Decision
Work together on software for District services eg Planning	Local decisions
Fit for purpose finance system in place before Vesting, also payroll with accurate establishment costs	Local decision
Get predecessor Council Statement of Accounts through Audit (we did 11 sets of accounts in one year)	Lack of capacity
More realistic expectation of local devolution of assets and services to Parish/Town/City Councils	Work continues

Lessons from Somerset (personal opinions)

Get as much done as possible before Vesting while you have more officers

Make sure you keep additional finance resources eg more than one Deputy s151

Make sure you have a clear Establishment cost for the staffing of all Councils

Make sure your Manifesto is ready for senior officers, ask the CEO for full response

Engage with other Councils eg Parish well in advance of Vesting

Plan the changes to critical software so no system is new on Vesting Day

Understand your Council tax base and rate, and historical reasons

Don't waste time, it's precious and the years go by so quickly

It's hard work, you need mix of political nous and project planning experience