

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT SOMERSET (STRUCTURAL CHANGES)  
ORDER 2022

*Wednesday 23 February 2022*

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**Sunday 27 February 2022**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* CLIVE EFFORD

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| † Aldous, Peter ( <i>Waveney</i> ) (Con)                          | † Mann, Scott ( <i>North Cornwall</i> ) (Con)          |
| † Amesbury, Mike ( <i>Weaver Vale</i> ) (Lab)                     | Osamor, Kate ( <i>Edmonton</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)           |
| † Badenoch, Kemi ( <i>Minister for Levelling Up Communities</i> ) | † Owatemi, Taiwo ( <i>Coventry North West</i> ) (Lab)  |
| † Browne, Anthony ( <i>South Cambridgeshire</i> ) (Con)           | † Warburton, David ( <i>Somerton and Frome</i> ) (Con) |
| † Clarke-Smith, Brendan ( <i>Bassetlaw</i> ) (Con)                | † Watling, Giles ( <i>Clacton</i> ) (Con)              |
| † Cummins, Judith ( <i>Bradford South</i> ) (Lab)                 | † Whitley, Mick ( <i>Birkenhead</i> ) (Lab)            |
| † Dowd, Peter ( <i>Bootle</i> ) (Lab)                             | † Young, Jacob ( <i>Redcar</i> ) (Con)                 |
| † Foy, Mary Kelly ( <i>City of Durham</i> ) (Lab)                 | Seb Newman, Jack Edwards, <i>Committee Clerks</i>      |
| † Fysh, Mr Marcus ( <i>Yeovil</i> ) (Con)                         |  |
| † Jones, Fay ( <i>Brecon and Radnorshire</i> ) (Con)              | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                        |

# Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee

Wednesday 23 February 2022

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

## Draft Somerset (Structural Changes) Order 2022

2.30 pm

**The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch):** I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Somerset (Structural Changes) Order 2022.

The draft order was laid before the House on 24 January 2022. If approved and made, it will implement the proposals submitted by Somerset County Council for a single unitary for the whole of the Somerset County Council area. The order will establish for the people of Somerset a new single unitary council. Implementing that proposal and establishing the unitary authority will enable stronger leadership and engagement at the strategic level and with communities at the most local level.

Somerset is not among the areas for an early county deal, but we will continue discussions with it about a future devolution deal. The reform for which the draft order provides will help pave the way for such a future deal.

Hon. Members may remember that this is locally led process of reform began formally on 9 October 2020. On that date, the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), invited all the principal councils in Somerset and the neighbouring unitary councils of Bath and North East Somerset and of North Somerset to put forward, if they wished, proposals to replace the current two-tier system of local government with single-tier local government.

The invitation set out the criteria for unitarisation. Unitary authorities would be established that are likely to improve local government and service delivery across the area of the proposal, giving greater value for money, generating savings, and providing stronger strategic and local leadership, with more sustainable structures; to command a good deal of local support, as assessed in the round, across the whole area of the proposal; and to have an area with a credible geography, consisting of one or more existing local government areas with an aggregate population that 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.

Two locally led proposals for local government reorganisation in Somerset were received in December 2020, one for a single unitary council and one for two unitary councils. Before we made any decisions on how to move forward, the Government consulted widely. The statutory consultation, which ran from 22 February to 19 April, prompted almost 5,500 responses. Of those responses, 5,167, or 94% of the total responses, were from residents living in the area affected. Both proposals

received a good deal of support: some 3,000 residents, or 57% of those who responded, supported a two-unitary option; some 2,000 residents, or 35% of those who responded, supported a single-unitary option; 72% of respondents from the business sector supported a single-unitary option; and 88% of respondents from other public service providers also supported the single-unitary option.

My right hon. Friend the then Secretary of State announced his decision on the proposals on 21 July 2021. He made a balanced judgment, assessing both proposals against the three criteria to which I referred, which were set out in the invitation of 9 October. He also had regard to all representations received, including responses to the consultation, and to all other relevant information available to him. He concluded that the two-unitary proposal did not meet the criterion of improving local government and service delivery across the area. He also concluded that it did not meet the credible geography criterion. He concluded that the single-unitary proposal met all three criteria set out in the invitation of 9 October.

The Government believe that there is a powerful case for implementing this locally led proposal for change. It will improve local government by enhancing social care and safeguarding services through closer connection with related services, such as housing, leisure and benefits. It will also improve local government by offering opportunities for improved strategic decision making in areas such as housing, planning and transport. It will provide improvements to local partnership working with other public sector bodies by aligning with arrangements in existing partnerships and allowing existing relationships and partnership working to be maintained without disruption. It will generate savings estimated by the county council to be £52.6 million over five years.

The unitary decision will preserve service delivery over a county-wide area that has an established local identity that is easily understood by residents. It will provide a single point of contact, so that residents, businesses and local communities will be able to access all council services from one place. If Parliament approves the draft order, from 1 April 2023, there will be a single unitary council for Somerset, delivering the improvements that I have just outlined.

We have prepared the draft order in discussion with all the councils concerned. I take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in the process for their work, which they undertook together constructively and collaboratively—not least local MPs. Our discussions with the councils included discussing the transitional and electoral arrangements. Those are key in how the councils will drive forward implementation. Where there has been unanimous agreement between all the councils, we have adopted their preferred approach. Where there were different views of the detailed provisions, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State considered all the differing views and reached a decision accordingly.

Turning to the detail of the draft order, I will highlight its key provisions. The order provides that, on 1 April 2023, the districts of Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset will be abolished. The councils of those districts will be wound up and dissolved. Their functions will transfer to the new unitary Somerset Council.

The draft order also provides for appropriate transitional arrangements. Those include, in May 2022, elections for the new unitary council, which will assume its full powers on 1 April 2023. The elections will be on the basis of a 110-member authority, with 55 two-member electoral divisions. Subsequent elections to the unitary council will be in May 2027 and every four years thereafter. We expect that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England will undertake a full electoral review before the May 2027 election. Parish council elections due in May 2023 will be brought forward to 2022 to align with the unitary council election cycle. A duty to co-operate during the transitional period to 1 April 2023 will be placed on existing councils.

To support councils in the transitional period to 1 April next year, if the draft order is approved and made, I intend to use my powers under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to issue a direction. The direction will provide statutory support to the voluntary protocol that the Somerset councils have already adopted on entering into contracts and the disposal of land during the transitional period. As one might expect, that is in line with the approach adopted in most previous unitarisation. It will ensure that the new unitary council has appropriate oversight of the commitments that predecessor councils may enter into during the transitional period and that the new unitary council will take on from 1 April 2023. Before issuing any such direction, I will invite council views on a draft.

In conclusion, through the draft order we seek to replace the existing local government structures in Somerset that were set up in 1974 with a new council that will be able to deliver high-quality, sustainable and local services to the people of Somerset. The council will be able to provide effective leadership at the strategic and the most local levels. All the existing councils have made it clear that they share those aims and are committed to the very best services for Somerset communities. The draft order will deliver that and, on that basis, I commend it to the Committee.

2.38 pm

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Efford.

It is worth giving a little context to this draft structural change order, because there is always a context to such changes. We should at least explore, if only a little, that context and perhaps tease out the narrative. The process cannot simply be transactional; I thought the Minister sounded very transactional, so this Committee provides the opportunity to tease out some of the issues and to make these things less transactional. We are dealing with the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

The financial context was set out in the *Weston Mercury* online in October 2013, in relation to the finances of Somerset County Council, which happens to be Tory controlled:

“A statement released by the authority said: ‘With a drastic reduction in funding from Government, coupled with increased costs and rising demand to look after elderly and disabled people, the council faces a £106 million black hole in its finances over the next four years—with cuts of £30 million required for next year alone.’”

That gives the context of the proposals. The article continued:

“The first phase of savings will be worth £7 million and include changing to low-energy streetlights and selling buildings, as well as moving services such as museums into non-profit trust ownership.”

Events, however, took a turn for the worse, if that were possible. In 2018, a report in *Somerset Live* stated that Somerset County Council could

“run out of money in the next two to three years”

unless urgent action was taken to curb spending. That, too, is the context for the draft order.

An official audit of the council by Grant Thornton LLP criticised its “pervasive” overspending and its failure to deliver sufficient savings over the past 12 months. That report came as the chairman and vice-chairman of the audit committee resigned from their posts and, as it happens, from the council’s ruling Conservative group. The council has said that action is being taken to ensure that services are protected and that the overspending does not continue. That is also part of the context of the draft order.

Meanwhile, the council maintained a council tax freeze—if my memory serves me right, but I could be wrong—for about six years. Mr Ruddle, one of those who resigned, told the BBC that he could

“no longer support the party’s direction of travel on local government finance.”

He went on to say:

“Somerset, in particular, finds itself in very poor financial shape after almost a decade of cuts in funding from central government, while demand for key services such as adult social care”—

to which the Minister referred—

“and children’s services is at record levels.”

He also said:

“I can no longer reconcile the basic contradiction...sitting as a local Conservative councillor under a Conservative government which is compounding this problem.”

That, too, is the context of the draft order.

That context goes to the heart of the proposals we are dealing with: a Tory council, bereft of financial stability under a Tory Government, with a Damascene conversion on the part of those two members, which took some years to ferment until reaching full maturity and ABV level. Meanwhile, the district councils in the county—Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset, with three under Liberal Democrat control and one under Tory control—recognised the need for change. They all bit the bullet.

In such strained circumstances, it was therefore right to consult the people of Somerset on the new local structural arrangements. The substantive reason, as far as I can tell, however, is a decade of underfunding, which in effect made those councils unsustainable in how they operated. It was not just an organisational issue, but substantially more than that. Yet nowhere in the announcement by the then Secretary of State on 21 July last year is there any mention of the financial causes of the reorganisation, and nor was there any in the Minister’s speech today. There should have been. It is as though the upheaval caused for the councils—and more importantly for the people of Somerset—by the years of cuts that have made this decision necessary has nothing to do with the actions of the Secretary of State or previous Secretaries of State in terms of the massive cuts to local government budgets generally.

[Peter Dowd]

From what I can tell, in the consultation the people of Somerset supported a proposal for two councils. In a poll run by the four district councils at a cost of £300,000, with about 110,000 people taking part, 65.3% voted for the district councils' "Stronger Somerset" proposal, which would have created two councils, Western Somerset and Eastern Somerset. However, the Tory-led Somerset County Council—which, remember, is a financial basket case, incapable of organising a tasting session in one of Somerset's fantastic beer or cider breweries, and on the brink of a potential section 114 notice for its incompetent handling of the county finances—described the poll as "deeply flawed" and "biased". It got to the stage where the leader of Somerset County Council had to deny that section 114 was in the offing.

For those members who do not know what a section 114 is, I will explain, as it is directly relevant. The then Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's "Local authority financial sustainability and the section 114 regime" report—its second report of the 2021-22 Session—set out the definition well:

"under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, a Chief Finance Officer is required to make a report, known as a section 114 notice, if it appears to them that the expenditure of the authority in a financial year is 'likely to exceed the resources (including sums borrowed) available to it to meet that expenditure.'...Once a council has issued a notice, spending on all but essential services must immediately cease. It is a statement that a council is in deep financial distress and requires assistance from central government."

That goes to the heart of the proposals. Hon. Members might want to read that report, because it helps to contextualise further the problems faced by local government in Somerset and more broadly. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham were members of that Select Committee. I am sure we can consult them on their views, if necessary.

I was the leader of a council for many years, and I have known a fair number of council leaders in my time, but I have known none who had to deny that a section 114 was in the offing, let alone anyone who had a section 114—I think there have been four in the past few years. So the leader of Somerset County Council was the pot calling the kettle black. As it happens, the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), said that the Secretary of State "cannot afford" to ignore the vote in the poll to which I referred. However, the former Secretary of State did ignore that poll.

Reorganisations of local government, such as the one proposed by the Minister today, really only paper over the cracks. That is the fact of the matter. Eventually, the Government will have to address the sustainability of local government finances, as per the report to which I referred. In that regard, the question for the Committee is whether we think that the draft order is a long-term solution for the problems facing Somerset local government, when those responsible for the problem in the first place, namely the Government, with their underfunding of local government, and the Tory-controlled county council, with its—let us be honest—incompetence, have not resolved it. The proposals, I hope, will help to resolve the problem, but they will not necessarily do so.

When the elections of 1 April 2022 come about in Somerset, as a result of the provisions under article 4, the people of Somerset will, I hope, send a message to the leader of the existing county council that, in the newly renamed Somerset Council, they do not want more of the financial and organisational incompetence that they have had in the old Somerset County Council. In the meantime, the statement by the former Secretary of State that he would not impose "top-down government solutions" has as much substance as a balloon.

The people of Somerset face major reorganisation of a council that has the responsibility to provide the services on which they rely every single day. From the moment a person wakes up, they will hear or see services provided by the local council. They might hear their bins being collected, before they see them. They will notice the lights on their street coming on or going off. Walking out of their house, they will step on a pavement, cross a road or walk through a park maintained by the council as they make their way to a library maintained by their council. There will be many services provided by the council that they did not even know the council had to provide. Local councils have as many as 3,000 statutory responsibilities.

Given that, given the major changes occurring and given the context in which these things are happening in Somerset, what assurances can the Minister give us in Committee that her Department will closely monitor the community engagement process undertaken by the new council? We should remember that people in Somerset have been used to a council that has provided services much more locally and much closer to them. So when it comes to this new county-wide council, to be authorised under the draft order by us in this Committee today, people need assurances that everything has been done to ensure that they are heard not just at election time, but throughout the years, by way of robust local community networks and engagement infrastructure.

How will the new council engage with its partners in the business, voluntary, community, faith and health—the Minister referred to that—sectors? What are the appropriate arrangements for the transition more broadly to the new council referred to in paragraph 2 of the explanatory notes? When will the Minister decide what incidental, consequential, transitional and supplementary provisions may be necessary in relation to section 14 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007?

Paragraph 7.4 of the explanatory notes refers to the Secretary of State not being convinced that the two-council proposal would improve local government or be "a credible geography". Why is that, when the 110,000 people in the poll, and even the official consultation, showed that that was not the view of local people? So much for listening to local people.

Is the Minister prepared to write to members of the Committee about paragraph 7.7 of the explanatory notes on the progress that the Implementation Executive is making? Paragraph 10.10 of the explanatory notes refers to those who did not support the unitary model—the majority of people—on the grounds that it would be

"too remote and local democracy would be diminished."

Will the Minister ensure that those concerns are given full vent in any community network arrangements? It would be helpful to know what those are. The topography,

the demography and the social and economic landscape is so varied in Somerset that careful consideration of community structures is required.

Will the Minister and the Department assure the people of Somerset that, despite the transactional approach we heard today, their views have not been discarded in the consultation and will be heard loud and clear during the transition phase? The people of Somerset deserve to be fully involved in the process at all stages. I hope that the Minister can give general and specific assurances on the impact of the proposals on the people of Somerset.

2.51 pm

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con):** It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairmanship. Mr Efford. I would like to ask the Minister a couple questions, but first, I welcome the order.

In my view, moving to a unitary authority is absolutely the right thing for the people of Somerset. It will allow a more integrated approach to health and social care, security, the way our police interact with district councils, and to powers that have not been implemented in a joined-up way before. Overall, that joined-up approach gives us the opportunity to transform services and improve them at the same time as providing better value for money for our residents in Somerset. Even more importantly, it means that we can speak with one voice in Somerset and work, as MPs who support the Government, with local people to achieve things for our area. It is a massive, once-in-a-generation opportunity that we must not pass up.

We heard some points about supposed context. They represented cloud cuckoo land when compared with my experience and knowledge of what has been going on in Somerset for many years. The opposite is the case. Our county council, of which I used to be a member, was saddled with a huge debt of £350 million by the previous Lib Dem administration. That costs residents of Somerset £40,000 a day to this day. It is outrageous.

**Peter Dowd:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Fysh:** I will not. The hon. Gentleman said many things that were patently not the case.

There is another point that people might not understand, and I would like the Minister's feedback on it. She talked about the transition arrangements and the commitments that the various councils would make not to enter into contracts and so on. South Somerset District Council, which is Lib Dem-run at the moment, has just run up another £120 million of debt against its assets. That is an outrageous layer of extra debt, which will fall to the unitary authority and the residents of Somerset to pay off. The council sold the council housing in Somerset some years ago and got £40 million. It was therefore in net cash but is now in massive debt. What can the Minister do to try to stop the Lib Dems implementing such a scorched earth policy in the coming months? They are undoubtedly engaged in that at the moment.

Somerset County Council plans to spend 13% more on adult social care and children's services in this year's budget, but it is raising council tax by only 2% on the main precept. That is a very strong performance, so it is

wrong to say that the scheme is being planned on the basis of trying to solve an issue that we, on this side of the House, have created.

I will just end by saying that we heard lots of aspersions cast against Somerset's Tory leader. Without wanting to say anything untoward here, I think that the residents of Somerset have a right to understand that the previous Lib Dem council leader of South Somerset is currently in jail for 11 years for pretty heinous crimes—well, very heinous crimes—and the main character witness at his trial was none other than the previous Lib Dem leader of the county council, who sits now in the other place, outrageously. My point is that these are not fit and proper people. The Lib Dems are not a fit and proper party to be involved in local government in Somerset ever again.

It is also worth the people of Somerset understanding that that district council—that Lib Dem-led district council—is currently also under investigation for endemic and widespread corruption. I wonder what the Minister can say about whether she will, for this period, which is so important in making the transition to a proper integrated unitary council, put the Lib Dem South Somerset administration—today—into special measures.

2.57 pm

**Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** Mr Efford, once again, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I think we may be marching towards local elections in some patches. I thank the Minister for an informative introduction to the draft statutory instrument. It obviously follows the one that we did last week, and I think we have another next week, too. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle for his eloquent and powerful speech, and also, of course, the hon. Member for Yeovil for trying to add some local context.

I will use the National Audit Office figures for local government cuts. It is coming up to 12 years of cuts, which are now at 50%. When 50% is taken away, councils struggle, including Somerset County Council—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle explained the seriousness of the matter, with the section 114 notice; in plain English, it was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Getting back to the statutory instrument, the Government consulted on two proposals, which the Minister outlined, for a move towards a unitary authority system for Somerset: Stronger Somerset, which proposed an east-and-west split with two unitary authorities, and One Somerset, which proposed a single unitary authority. The answer from the public was clear, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle mentioned, with well over 100,000 responses—I think there were 110,000 responses—to a public poll. That is quite substantial, and, as politicians, we have an eye on polls.

**Peter Dowd:** The point that my hon. Friend has raised is pertinent. As it happens, the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) said, in relation to that poll, that the Secretary of State “cannot afford” to ignore the vote but, of course, he did, didn't he?

**Mike Amesbury:** That certainly seems to be the case; it is evidently clear. In that poll of more than 110,000 people, 65% supported the two-unitary proposal, and only 35%

[Mike Amesbury]

the single-unitary proposal, yet the Secretary of State and the Minister march on with this devolution proposal that seems to have been rejected by a public poll.

It was not just the public who did not support the single-unitary proposal. In response to the consultation, a statement by the four district councils disputed the idea that the proposal had local support, describing the Government as

“foisting a manifestly unpopular new local government on our residents”—

not my words, but those of the district councils.

The Government criteria for unitary authority proposals, to which the Minister rightly referred, include the need for plans to be locally approved. As I stated earlier this week, on a previous statutory instrument similar to the draft order, the explanatory notes for such restructuring instruments state that plans should be “locally led”, as any devolution proposal should be, and should “command a good deal of local support”.

Will the Minister therefore explain whether 35% is now considered “a good deal” of support?

**Peter Dowd:** The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset said—my hon. Friend is probably aware of this, but perhaps he will clarify—not only that the Secretary of State “could not afford” to ignore that vote, but:

“The Secretary of State might have preferred us all to go away and forget this referendum, but we didn’t”.

Is that an important comment by a Member of Parliament who represents the area?

**Mike Amesbury:** It is very important. I concur with that good and important intervention by my hon. Friend.

The Secondary Legislation Committee marked the draft order, as well as those for North Yorkshire—which we have already discussed in Committee—and Cumbria as instruments of interest, because of that question of local say in and ownership of devolution. Does the Minister consider the local support aspect of the criteria to be less important than the others in this and other similar proposals that we will discuss in the not-too-distant future? Is that why, when the Stronger Somerset proposal was apparently rejected on other grounds, the One Somerset proposal was taken forward despite clearly not fulfilling the criteria that the Government had set out?

The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger)—whom the hon. Member for Yeovil knows well—repeatedly and loudly expressed his concerns in the House of Commons Chamber about the plan, stating that the logic of the decision to approve the plan is bizarre. He is not a shadow Minister, but a local Conservative Member of Parliament. His concerns and those of the local people who supported the plan for two unitary councils appear to centre on the fear of a loss of local connection and of democracy under one authority—one authority that is currently struggling and financially on its knees.

**Mr Fysh:** Rubbish!

**Mike Amesbury:** It is a fact. The facts are there to see. The Minister referred to cost savings of £52 million—correct me if I am wrong—under this proposal. What does that £52 million equate to? How many libraries will disappear? How many youth centres will close? How many grass verges will not be cut as often? How will waste and refuse services be affected? We do not know. Those are all unanswered questions, and for people in Somerset, the answers are vital.

There is a reference to local networks. I do not know how many of them there will be. They are there so that we can try to ensure a connection with the localities that are losing representation. I think the estimate was 15 to 20. I ask the Minister: how many is it—15 or 20? Will they have real delegated powers over transport, planning and housing—the bread-and-butter issues that people associate with their councils?

As Members from across the House should agree, devolution has to be shaped by local residents, and key stakeholders such as MPs, councils, and certainly the business community. I look forward to the Minister’s answers to my questions, and to the justification for what some will see as a diktat from the Secretary of State—from Westminster. The Minister said that there was no county devo deal; money would come with that. We are talking about a county council on the brink of bankruptcy. I look forward to her response to a number of questions that have been asked today.

**The Chair:** Mr Fysh, I have consulted the video assistant referee regarding your reference to somebody in the other House not being a fit and proper person, and I am told that that was not in order. May I respectfully ask you to withdraw that comment?

**Mr Fysh:** I am happy to withdraw that. What I meant was that the Liberal Democrats are no longer fit and proper persons to be involved in local government in Somerset. The person I referred to was the character witness at the trial of a man who was convicted to 11 years—

**The Chair:** Order. Please take your seat. All I needed from you was a withdrawal of your statement. You have clarified that you withdraw it; that is fine. I call the Minister.

3.7 pm

**Kemi Badenoch:** I have been very encouraged by our spirited debate on this statutory instrument. Yesterday we managed to complete our discussion in 15 minutes; this has been a genuine debate. I thank all members of the Committee for their contribution, but I will say that I disagree with the entire premise of the arguments made by the hon. Member for Bootle. He seems to believe that this is an issue of local government finance. It is not; it is about devolution and levelling up. Unitarisation is not a solution to deep-seated—

**Peter Dowd:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Kemi Badenoch:** No, because I can tell that the hon. Gentleman wants to have a debate about local government finance. This is a structural change order. He did not speak in the local government finance settlement debate a couple of weeks ago, in which he could have raised



many of these issues. In fact, a lot of the points that he made would be more suitable for a debate in the Somerset County Council chamber, and were not really relevant to the structural change order that we are considering.

I must stress to all Members—I have made this point previously—that unitarisation is not a one-size-fits-all solution to multiple problems. If what the hon. Gentleman said is true—from what I heard from Members representing Somerset, it is not true that there are deep-seated financial issues—unitarisation would not fix the problems, so it does not make sense for him to argue that those problems are why we are making these changes. Considering what we have had to do in Liverpool—I will not go into the details—it is extraordinary that he, a Merseyside MP, is talking about what is happening in Somerset.

**Peter Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Efford. The Minister really needs to get her facts right. I am the Member of Parliament responsible for Sefton Council, which is a different borough. Why on earth she is referring to Liverpool, when I do not represent Liverpool, is beyond me.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your intervention. We do not need to get sidetracked into the finances of local authorities. We are dealing with Somerset, and if we could stick with what we are here to debate, I would be grateful.

**Kemi Badenoch:** Thank you, Mr Efford; I think that is right. However, the hon. Member for Bootle made a point about Tory-controlled councils, so I think I can make a point about Labour-controlled councils in response. He is a Merseyside MP—I did not say he was a Liverpool MP—and the fact is that the four commissioners that we sent from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities were appointed after an emergency inspection found a serious breakdown of governance and multiple failures. The inspection was triggered by the arrest of ex-Mayor Joe Anderson.

**The Chair:** Order. We are not going any further down that road. We are going to debate Somerset.

**Kemi Badenoch:** Yes, and I will come back to Somerset.

**Mike Amesbury:** On a point of order, Mr Efford. Reference was made to Liverpool and Merseyside, because you have just increased the fees for the commissioners by 50%—

**The Chair:** No, no, no. That is not a point of order; it is a point of debate, and it is not for this debate. Good try, but it is not for this debate. Minister, stick with Somerset.

**Kemi Badenoch:** Thank you, Mr Efford. I shall now stick with Somerset. Opposition Members have raised multiple questions, but first I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil for adding quite a lot of local context to what has been going on and reminding me that we have had considerable engagement not just with Members of Parliament—we know that they were not

unanimous, but the vast majority of Somerset MPs agree with what is happening today—but with district councils. I wrote to them asking for further views about things that we wanted to do around election dates and so on. They were largely Liberal Democrat-controlled councils, and the decision that was being made was not a partisan political one. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising some of those points and allowing me to draw out the context.

I will now move on to some of the questions that were asked. My hon. Friend specifically asked about putting Lib Dem South Somerset into special measures. I cannot do that in the SI debate, but I will update him about some of the issues that he has referred to. I am sure I can get officials to write to him to provide additional information.

The shadow Minister asked a question about engagement and the local community networks, and whether it was 15 or 20. It is 15 to 20; that is something that they can decide themselves. Those local community networks will cover every part of Somerset. They will be, effectively, cabinet committees of the new council and supported by a senior community development officer. I think that is the right way to go, and it shows that these are locally led proposals.

I ask forgiveness from the hon. Member for Bootle, who asked some further questions specifically about the text of the SI. I will write to him on some of those points; I have missed the notes that I made. There was a substantive discussion around the consultation, and he raised very good points. I do not think it is odd for him to raise them. We look at all the decisions that we make in the round, and the referendum principle does not apply here. Those consultations are not referendums; they are advisory. In some cases, they can show that there is a distinct lack of interest in a particular proposal. The way we phrased it in the consultation was not as an either/or, but as a preference. The fact that people might have preferred one to the other did not mean that they did not like the other. That is why the Secretary of State took all those decisions in the round. The basis for the proposal is not just that one criterion, but all the others. I mentioned in my speech that it was about the geographical context as well as the ability to provide for local service delivery, and I am happy to repeat that.

The hon. Gentleman said that the savings were just £52 million, but I should emphasise that there is a huge opportunity here to enhance social care and safeguarding services. I do not think anyone in this room would disagree with that outcome. There are better opportunities for improved strategic decision making and improved service delivery. We will be getting quite a lot from this unitarisation, and I really hope that Members from all parties in Somerset and beyond—all the way to Merseyside—will be able to support us as we continue with these proposals.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Somerset (Structural Changes) Order 2022.

3.14 pm

*Committee rose.*





