

Somerset Council

Community Working

Review - Conclusions

and Recommendations

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**CITIZEN
NETWORK**

FOR A WORLD WHERE
EVERYONE MATTERS

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Executive Summary

The inclusion and democracy organisation [Citizen Network](#) was commissioned to review how Somerset Council currently engages and develops communities and to propose changes where necessary.

The review was designed to reflect on the aspirations set at the time the Council became a unitary authority and the experience since. As well as the local issues, this review comes at a time when there is widespread administrative, and political, change at a local and national government level, and the learnings from this review are relevant for both the county of Somerset and nationally in terms of understanding ‘what works’ (and what works less well) in working with neighbourhoods in the context of the shift to a unitary Council.

In the field of community working there are numerous terms that will need definition. First and foremost amongst these are ‘community engagement’ and ‘community development’:

“The practice of engaging with communities (community engagement) is to ensure that what the council does meets community needs.”

“The practice of working with communities (community development) is to support communities to meet their own needs.”

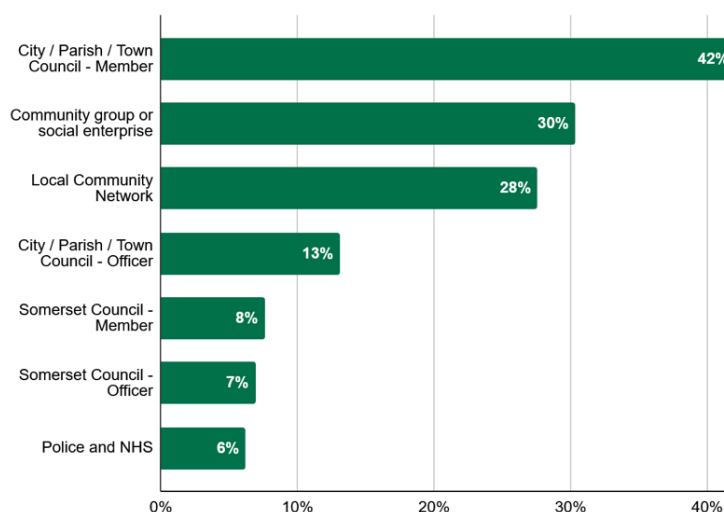
These two terms contain a fundamental tension which is present throughout this review and rooted in the context of public service provision and reform for the last two decades. Financial pressures on local authorities, coupled with increases in demand driven by both demographics and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, have inevitably led to a situation in which councils have had to manage demand, and communities have had to ‘do more’ for themselves. At the same time, we have seen a growth in the desire of some City, Town and Parish Councils, community groups and communities wanting greater control over the services and assets in their areas. Communities **have** to do more for themselves in some instances, (potentially feeling a responsibility forced on them, or having to live without important services), and **want** to do more in others (potentially feeling frustrated and excluded). These tensions and key lessons for working well with communities are present throughout this report.

Who was involved in the community working review?

In conducting our research the review team spoke to people from

- Parish, town and city councils
- The Voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCSFEs)
- Local Community Networks (LCNs)
- Public sector organisations
- Social prescribing services
- Everyday makers and doers

Organisations survey respondents were part of:



Working with diverse views

As the graph above shows, we talked with 145 people in the research phase and then worked more deeply with many of them in the second, design phase of the review. It should be emphasised at the outset there is no consensus on the experience to date nor on what to do next. There are a wide range of views, passionately held and in some cases quite entrenched. There is in addition an unfortunate focus, present throughout our work, that this is purely a debate about what to do with Local Community Networks (LCN's). For the avoidance of doubt, the review is about the work that Somerset Council does to engage and develop communities as a whole. That work involves many people and activities from the work that many services do to consult and work with communities, the work of village agents, the work of Connect Somerset and work done through the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCSFE) sector. Though not in scope, the review inevitably gathered views about the impact of this work whilst partner agencies are also trying to engage and develop the same communities.

What emerges overall that there is no shortage of effort or intention to both engage communities and work to help them to develop in Somerset. What we found is not a story of a lack of intention, integrity or indeed effort; rather it is a story of:

- a lack of joined up action,
- insufficient understanding of the impact those actions are having, a
- a difficulty in working well with what exists already rather than trying to create something new
- a difficulty in seeking the views, listening and responding to communities at a local level.

The choice now is between carrying on with a highly centralised system with weak communications links into and out of local areas, or pivoting toward a wholehearted,

coherent and resourced commitment to developmental and preventative place-based working as a central plank in the Council’s strategy.

Anticipating the likely divergence of views amongst stakeholders, we used techniques that originated from service design or ‘design thinking’. In design thinking, the presence of diverse views creates an opportunity to develop ‘both and’ solutions; combining the suggested actions of different perspectives to generate options that, taken together can lead to an innovative agreed way forward. In each section there is a structure that

- a) Defines the issue being considered
- b) Identifies the different views being expressed by respondents
- c) Explores in more depth the issues underlying the views people are expressing and
- d) Proposes a way forward that, where possible, represents the best of both worlds and accords with good practice in the view of the Citizen Network team.

In all areas under review, there was a central tension between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom-up’ ways of thinking: Top-down solutions have an emphasis on order and rationality: co-terminous boundaries, consistency, standardisation, a focus on needs and gaps and on creating new structures and meetings. Bottom-up solutions emphasise emergence, variety, porous boundaries, working with what exists, and a focus on community assets, abilities and capacity.

Findings and recommendations

This section should be read in conjunction with the first phase of our work [‘Findings of Research into Somerset Council’s Work with Communities’](#). Our findings are divided into a number of sections:

Section	Focus - whether the current arrangements...
<i>Strategic change and partnerships</i>	Enable partners to work together at a local level
<i>Increasing community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery</i>	Enable the community to have a real say on shaping policy and services
<i>The role of Somerset Council in working with communities</i>	Foster good relationships between Somerset Council and communities
<i>Supporting Capacity in the Community</i>	Help to build the resources available communities
<i>Supporting communities to become more self-reliant</i>	Help to identify and build on the strengths and assets already in communities
<i>Effective cross organisation and partner working in places</i>	Create a coherent geography for joint working

Strategic change and partnerships

This aspect of our work was centred around the extent to which the current arrangements enabled Somerset Council and its partners to work together in and with communities. These partners include those in statutory as well as voluntary sectors. Both the research findings and subsequent discussions found the current situation to be sub-optimal; whilst all organisations input significant effort to engage with communities, despite pursuing common agendas, many initiatives are separate from each other and do not take account of one another (see Findings of Research, 7.6 and 7.7).

Competing policy options emerging in the design workshops varied from a top-down approach that would seek to aggregate all initiatives and rationalise them, creating a planned and joined-up approach to preventing avoidable demand on services by helping earlier. Others contend that this is not only impossible but would cut across much informal activity that supports people and prevents the need for crisis services, in society as well as in the VCFSE sector.

Top-down preventative activity is multi-system (in the sense that it is a duty on many statutory agencies) but the duty is still fragmented, with at least five parallel prevention approaches being drive by central government, which have little relationship to each other. From a bottom up perspective, it is vital to identify and map as far as possible the assets that exists in communities, from universal provision that supports people in everyday life, to timely targeted provision that supports people in difficulty to prevent escalation¹. The key is to bring top-down and bottom-up approaches together at a local level.

Recommendations

1. For all agencies to commit to an intentional and definitive and irreversible shift toward joining up attempts to eliminate preventable demand in service provision as a central plank in the future strategy of the Council and its partnerships.
2. For Somerset Council and partners to co-create a shared outcomes framework that enables a focus on common goals.
3. Somerset Council should recognise and place greater value on the role and contribution of the VCFSE sector in that journey by recognising its contribution and building on existing strengths.
4. For Somerset Council and its partners to co-develop jointly investable initiatives that lead to greater resilience in communities.

¹ For a more detailed exploration of the value that exists in communities go here <https://valuingcommunity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Value-Typology%E2%80%9494Briefing-Note-1-web.pdf>

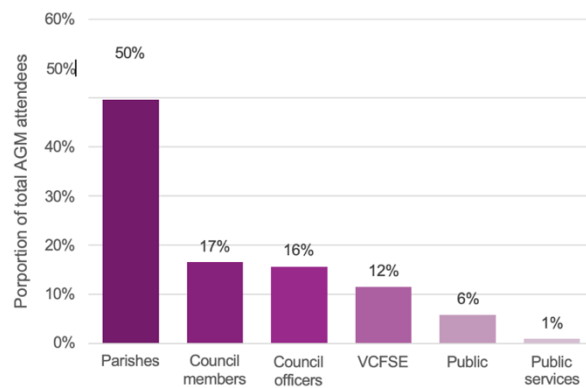
5. To co-locate, where appropriate, services at a neighbourhood level.
6. To identify and build on the strengths and assets of communities.

Increasing community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery

This section considers the extent to which community views play a part in shaping the services provided by Somerset Council and its partner agencies.

Despite the intention for them engage the wider community, our research found that LCNs tend to attract parish, town and city councillors and some representatives from Somerset Council, rather than engaging the community as the graph shows (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1)

Figure 6.1.1 Attendance at LCN AGMs by stakeholder group (n=416)



Furthermore, we found evidence that the voice of local communities has had a variable impact on service provision, with some services effectively involving communities, at least in some cases, whilst other services struggled to engage (see Findings of Research, 6.1.3)

Our conclusion is that Somerset Council can address these imbalances in experience by committing to be:

- Effective in engaging the wider community.
- Organised to create interface points which allows views to be fed into decision making.
- Fluent in its approach to service co-design with communities and service users.

Recommendations

7. Rename and refresh the LCNs as Community Forums, emphasising their role as bodies that bring (partners) together and stimulate activity rather than carry it out themselves.
8. Recognise that their role is not to engage the public directly but to gather together the outcomes of all community engagement activity to form a picture of the local area.
9. Refresh and revalue the role of Council link officers, as enablers of the more autonomous Community Forums, acting as catalysts in increasing engagement and co-development activity across the area.
10. Initiate a debate within Somerset Council as to whether it needs to restructure to

better support place-based working at a neighbourhood level.

11. Ensure that Somerset Council and partners work to create clearer relationships for a refreshed, more co-terminous locality geography
12. Create a '**duty to co-design**' within Somerset Council services that stimulates changes in the culture of the organisation so that policy-making and service design is more attuned to local input and feedback.

The role of Somerset Council in working with communities

This section focuses on the relationship between Somerset Council and localities created by the current arrangements.

Our research found that the establishment of the LCNs had felt like something of an imposition that had either cut across or ignored existing networks and relationships. Furthermore, the method used to run meetings, borrowing much from the committee management practices of the Council's Democratic Services function, had also felt alien at a local level. VCFSE attendance is the next to lowest category at LCN meetings because, essentially, those in the sector felt little benefit from attending, given the lack of perceived impact, benefit, or opportunity for networking (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1).

In addition, the situation needs to be understood in the context of what happens in any system when linear and hierarchical structures meet the networked and organic components of a community.

In our view, the only sustainable way forward is to equip communities with the tools and resources necessary to promote greater self-organisation, rather than to try and organise the community by trying to shoehorn the players into structures that undermine organic coherence. As Cormac Russell has said:

"Instead of asking how you or your organisation can create more value in communities, ask how you can create more space for communities to create what they value"

To achieve this there are therefore a number of 'shifts' that Somerset Council needs to make:

- First is to make an overt commitment to move from an approach that aims to 'develop' communities to one based on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). This includes holding meetings in a way that supports discussion, networking, and development of plans or activities that originate from community stakeholders, rather than being restricted by central priorities and processes. The second part of this shift is supporting stakeholders within localities to understand local priorities and progress, making relevant data and insights available in localities, alongside supporting the gathering of further evidence where needed.
- Combining these elements has the potential to enable localities if they choose to create Community Pictures. Such pictures could set out the priorities for local

areas and enable the tracking of key indicators to inform policy development and resource planning within Somerset Council. They could also give Councillors at a local level the means to advocate for their communities as well as give a common focus for local action.

Recommendations

13. Make an intentional, definitive and irreversible shift toward strengths and assets based community development.
14. Provide places with the tools and ability to create asset maps that encompass all the relevant assets in an area.
15. Make good on the initial promise to provide datasets and the ability to derive insights (using big data and AI-based approaches) about the issues facing local areas.
16. Enable the opportunity for the creation of Community Pictures (should localities choose to develop them) that integrate other plans, gather information about the local situation and priorities and track progress in relation to identified priorities.

Supporting Capacity in the Community

This area has been the subject of considerable attention and debate as recently as 2024 culminating in a number of papers on the state of the VCSFE sector in Somerset and a Memorandum of Understanding that addresses the issues facing it. There is a clear shift in responsibility, which has happened both through the impact of austerity as well as the desire to stimulate the activity and capacity of the sector, and this has created greater reliance on it. In Somerset, over 60% of organisations are in the 'micro' to 'small' category. For both large- and small-scale organisations our research showed a continuing vulnerability with:

- **Substitution** when VCFSEs step in to provide services that have traditionally been the responsibility of the government, becoming a societal 'safety net'.
- **Appropriation** or co-opting of voluntary sector resources, methods, or roles by the public sector, which damages the impact of VCFSEs on the people and communities they seek to serve.

In terms of commissioning, whilst predictability enables capacity, flexibility enables innovation. The system currently delivers neither well (see Findings of Research, 6.3.2).

Recommendations

17. Build a set of funding arrangements that enable stability where possible, flexibility where necessary
18. Focus on the commissioning of outcomes, not just service specifications to enable more groups and organisations to see their potential for involvement.
19. Consider the introduction of a mixed funding model: core infrastructure funding, small, fast local grants and.

20. Change the language used in the process from “commissioner/provider” to “collaborator/partner” where appropriate.
21. Invest in evaluations that capture relational and preventative value (impact and social value).
22. Make funding decisions transparent and place-aware, reflecting the value of networks and VCFSEs already present in the area.

Supporting communities to become more self-reliant

The research and workshops acknowledged that it is both desirable and likely that there will be continued devolution to cities, towns and parishes and to community organisations as well. Many people foresaw this agenda gathering momentum as the real disposable income of Somerset Council continues to be diminished by the demand for social care services. However, our research shows that though many are enthusiastic about the devolution agenda overall, many are cautious and nervous about accelerated or forced devolution against the wishes of localities or beyond their capacity to cope with it (see Findings of Research, 6.3.1 and 7.3.1).

Getting the balance right will be crucial if devolution is to remain a positive agenda. It is vital to see devolution not as a process of offloading Somerset Council assets to relieve its financial situation but as a choice exercised locally where assets are part of the narrative of community development Community.

Seen through this latter lens localities can use these assets as a catalyst for achieving better outcomes.

Recommendations

23. Ensure that city, town and parish councils and community organisations have the tools to be able to develop devolution propositions.
24. Ensure that devolution ‘deals’ identify how assets can be better used locally and the difference these will make to outcomes for local people.
25. Continue with a negotiated approach to devolution where the onus is on localities to express and progress the agreements they want to make, and be clear that, over time, some responsibilities will be best placed at a locality level.
26. Adopt a graduated, capacity-sensitive devolution framework with a devolution list of items in tiers, starting small and simple and progressing to more complex deals where required.
27. Support parish and VCFSE collaboration and clustering, so that they can work together to take desired items forward.

Effective cross organisation and partner working in places

SC divides the administrative county into a number of areas, which sets the geography

within which agencies collaborate. We are aware that much thought and not a little agonising went in the development of the boundaries that define the current LCNs. In the end the 18 areas, the greatest number from the available options were selected to honour more natural geographies our research shows that there is still some unhappiness with the way the boundaries have been drawn and indeed, for some, that they have been drawn at all (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1 and 7.3.1).

To further complicate matters, the current LCN boundaries are not the only boundaries. Different organisations have different ways of dividing the administrative county and different services within organisations have different ways still.

There are also the different agendas and time horizons that impact organisations and the way they divide the area, both the NHS and Police are also going through significant change.

The research shows that some of the most effective formations for the current LCN's have not been geographic but thematic (see Findings of Research, 7.1.2).

In our experience it is almost impossible to get this right. Every line on the map, no matter how carefully drawn creates a division that will advantage some agendas and disadvantage others.

There are no complete solutions here. Our view, therefore, is to enable different geographical relationships depending on the work that Community Forums believe they need to do.

Because of the relationship to the NHS and the need for the NHS and local government to work closely together in so many ways, to us it makes sense to align these geographies as much as possible. However, it is also important that these boundaries do not limit other working relationships in different geographies should the situation demand it.

One reason why organisations work so much in silos is that their accountability is often toward central government departments. They look 'up not out' and they are driven by different missions which are pursued single mindedly and sometimes at the expense of one another. One way to unite them may well be to find ways in which they have greater accountability to the locality through the Community Pictures described above.

Recommendations

28. Redraw the geographies of the existing LCNs to create Community Forums coterminous with health reform, ensure that SC structure relates to this also.
29. Enable Community Forums to create arrangements to work with others depending on the issues they are trying to address.
30. Ensure that any Community Picture identifies priority actions for services working together in a local area, sets clear criteria for success and allows progress to be tracked.
31. Ensure a shift in accountability so that services are accountable to communities based on the Community Picture.

Support members and place-based officers in their community roles

This section relates to elected members and also includes consideration of the role officers who have a role in engaging, convening and communicating with communities and between communities and Somerset Council.

Our research shows that members felt ill-equipped (see Findings of Research, 6.2.1).

- The ‘think member’ initiative is not as effective as it could be.
- Member engagement in the current community engagement arrangements is also not consistent.
- When it comes to advocacy and representation, members often struggle to get any more traction than the LCNs themselves in talking with and influencing decision makers.
- Some members at SC and parish level did have a positive experience and felt it was valuable when information shared proactively with councillors, enabling effective community leadership, when they felt their knowledge and experience of localities was valued.

This picture is about to be changed by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026. All the signs are that rather than powers being devolved to these committees, certain (yet to be defined) decision making responsibilities will be devolved to local members sitting as members of those committees.

To ensure good governance at a locality level there is a need to equip members with enhanced tools to enable dialogue with the public.

In the current LCN set up there are the LCN link officers working primarily with parishes and VCFSEs, but there are other Somerset Council instituted or supported roles in localities as well. Connect Somerset is a multi-agency early-help partnership. Twelve ‘Champions’ hosted in community organisations, work across the county to join up public services and connect to the voluntary and community sector, improving the efficiency of how services work together. The respective roles of these two bodies needs clarifying as, outwardly they can appear to be doing the same work. In addition, there is a group of Village Agents who are paid individuals, some of whom live in the parish "clusters" where they identify and support adults in the community.

Given financial pressures, there is on the face of it there is an opportunity to potentially integrate and rationalise these roles. However they currently exercise very different functions in different geographies, so we would be wary of doing this though there may be ways in time that these functions could coalesce

Recommendations

32. Clearly define the member community leadership role in the approach and what they:

- can **influence** - their contribution to service and policy design,

- can **decide** - (delegation under Clause 60 of the EDCP Act for Somerset councillors) that can be influenced through local engagement
 - can **escalate** - their role in service issues and individual cases (what intelligence do members hold that the system currently loses?)
33. To provide support for members to gauge sentiment and test ideas in order to better evidence local ambitions and opportunities.
34. Recognise and refresh the role descriptions of Link Officers so that they can
- Be strategic not just operational
 - Develop and coordinate of the production of any Community Picture
 - Provide strategic support for members in their divisional role engagement across their area
 - Help their allocated Neighbourhood Forum decide with which other Community Forums they should work to address issues relevant to their area
 - Gather and communicate available local data and insight
 - Map current community engagement activity and promote further activity by organisations in the area
 - Gather available local plans and strategies
 - Build trust at a local level

Introduction

The inclusion and democracy organisation [Citizen Network](#) was commissioned to review how **Somerset Council**¹ can support and engage communities. The review was designed to reflect on the aspirations set at the time the Council became a unitary authority and the experience since.

In commissioning this work, Somerset Council asked us to:

- 1.1.1 Provide an insight into National policy and best practice relating to the role of a unitary council in supporting the growth of resilient and sustainable communities, community development and participatory practices.
- 1.1.2 Engage with a range of stakeholders including Somerset Councillors, representatives of local VCFSE partners, Health, Police and other statutory colleagues, Somerset Council staff and City, Town and Parish Councillors and clerks to understand and collate aspirations, expectations and challenges regarding a current approach and future development.
- 1.1.3 Co-produce a framework for Somerset Council (SC) which identifies opportunities to build, evaluate and continuously improve, an effective programme of community development and engagement.
- 1.1.4 Build on work already started with a range of council services and colleagues to strengthen SC's relationship with communities.
- 1.1.5 Examine different approaches to supporting the development of more resilient communities, to support self-help and as part of a wider prevention strategy
- 1.1.6 Consider how Somerset Council services make best use of engagement opportunities to help shape and frame service delivery, policies and strategies.
- 1.1.7 Culminate in a report, with a series of recommendations and an achievable action plan to be reported and agreed through Somerset Council's governance process.

It should be noted that this is a time when, across the public sector there are numerous legislative and policy drives that are focused on this area as government tries to stem the tide of ever rising demand for services driven by demographic patterns, whilst at the same time calls for greater devolution are growing from community organisations and pressure groups.

The Landscape – defining and mapping Community Engagement and Development Activity

Community engagement and development

In the field of community work there are numerous terms that will need definition, first and foremost amongst these are community engagement and community development:

“The practice of engaging with communities (community engagement) is to ensure that what the council does meets community needs.

The practice of working with communities (community development) is to support communities to meet their own needs.”

We will provide further definitions as we progress, but these two terms contain a fundamental tension which is present throughout our discussion and rooted in the context of public service provision and reform for the last 2 decades. According to the Institute for Government, we have seen Local authority spending power fall by 22.6% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2019/20, driven by Central government reduction in funding by 40.1% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, from £51.8bn to £31.0bn (in 2025/26 prices). That downward trend reversed from 2020/21, but in 2024/25 grants were still 18.8% lower in real terms than in 2009/10. The financial picture, coupled with increases in demand driven by both demographics and the pandemic, have inevitably led to a situation in which councils have had to manage demand, and communities have had to do more for themselves.

At the same time we have seen a growth in the desire of some City, Town and Parish Councils, community groups and communities themselves to want to have greater control over what happens to them. An upsurge on what the pressure group New Local describe as ‘community power’: that local communities (of place, but also communities of experience and interest) should be given much greater say and control over the decisions, services, amenities and places that shape and affect their lives.

These dynamics, of communities having to more for themselves in some instances (potentially feeling dumped on forced to live without important services) and wanting to do more in others (potentially feeling frustrated and excluded) are present throughout this report, which has influenced the shifting relationships between the council and the community during this time.

Who is involved?

The ‘infrastructure’ of this activity involves many parts of varying formality:

Parish, town and city councils: Somerset has 327 parishes, ranging from small rural communities with populations under 100 to substantial towns with populations over 60,000. These councils are independent local authorities with their own precepts, democratic mandates, and statutory powers. Some have significant staff teams and service delivery capacity; others rely entirely on volunteer clerks and have minimal budgets.

Voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector: Somerset has a diverse landscape of well over 3,000 organisations providing services, coordinating volunteers, and advocating for communities. Infrastructure organisations like Spark Somerset provide support to this sector, which includes everything from anchor organisations to

small informal networks. The Strategic Partnerships team maintains a [Memorandum](#) of Understanding between the VCFSE sector, the Council, and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) which sets out “how they will engage and embed the VCFSE sector in system level governance and decision-making arrangements and collaborate with the sector in Somerset to deliver better health and wellbeing outcomes for the people who live here”.

Local Community Networks (LCNs) were part of the original One Somerset Business Case for shifting towards a single unitary authority for Somerset. They have faced variable engagement on a strategic and everyday basis. Their position as the potential neighbourhood governance structure at a point when this may become mandatory offers an opportunity for positive change and building on experience.

The LCNs were established as part of Somerset's local government reorganisation in 2023, replacing the previous district council structures for engagement and creating new mechanisms for community engagement with the new unitary authority. Learning from three pilot areas was combined with reviews of locality working in other unitary councils. There were suggestions that LCNs could play a place-shaping role around planning or an integrative role for public services (Stafford and Skirton, 2022).

Their primary function has been bringing together the Council, parish & town councils, VCFSEs, public sector partners alongside initiating thematic working groups.

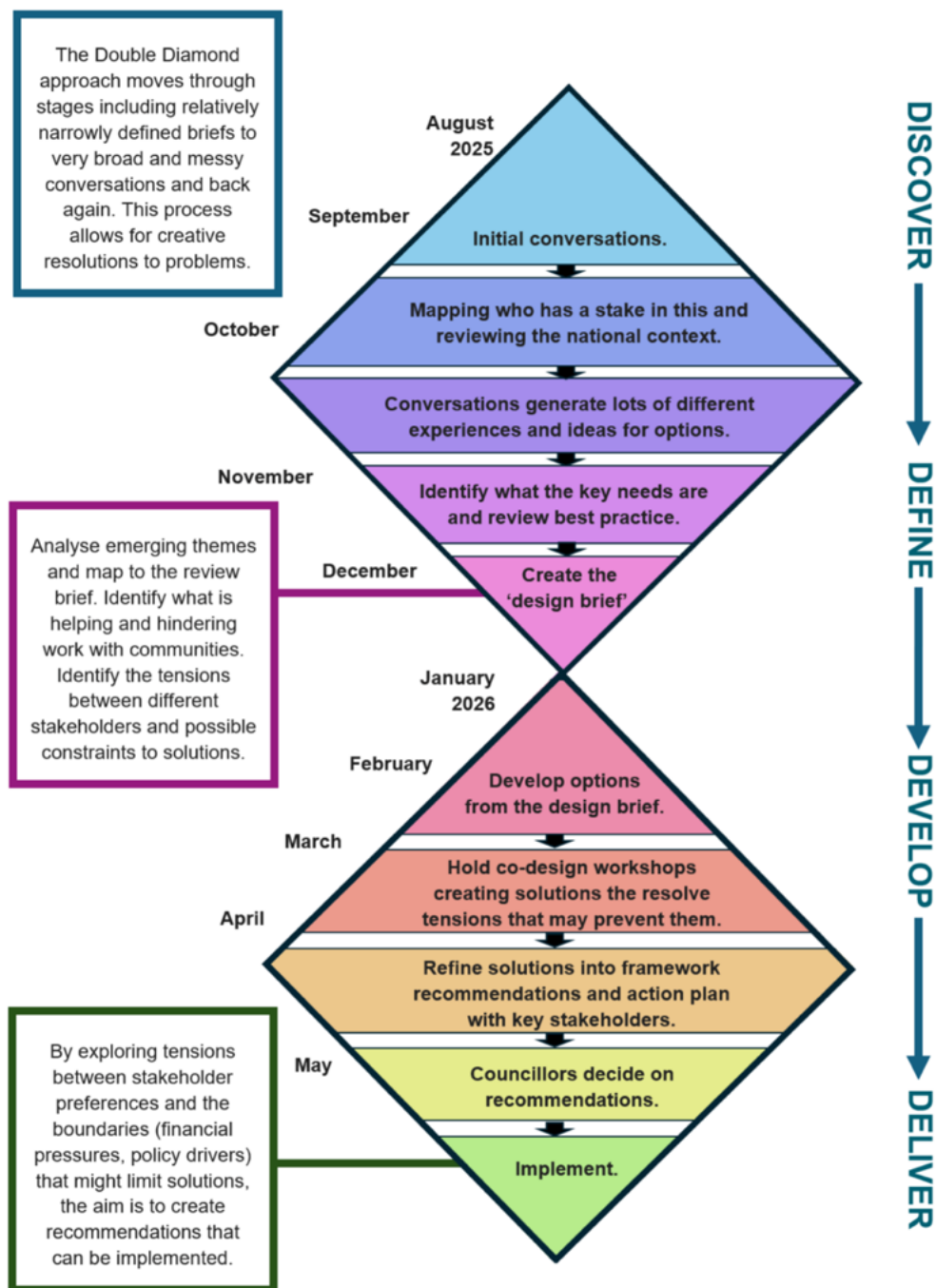
Public sector engagement: The ICB, Primary Care Networks (13 PCNs across Somerset) and GP practices (61 across Somerset) create multiple channels for health-related community engagement. The emerging NHS neighbourhood board structures seek to create more cross-team working with the broad aim of increasing health, including early preventative work. This is similar to the existing Connect Somerset collaboration across multiple agencies around ‘cradle to career’ provision, aiming to create efficient and more effective working around families, early years and young people. The Council funded Connect Somerset Champions performing a stakeholder linkage role in this area. The police service (2 districts in Somerset) is transforming to a more integrated model, seeking to perform a similar role around maintaining law and order.

Social prescribing services: Multiple agencies and services provide social prescribing services across Somerset, including Village Agents, Health Connectors, Social Prescribing Link Workers, Health Coaches and others. These social prescribers listen to people and then refer them to a range of sources of support. Their role varies depending on the organisations they are funded by and embedded in. They aim to act as trusted contacts who understand how to link people to activities that will help them.

Everyday makers and doers: Every community has people who contribute through relationships of care, helping family or friends, alongside local business owners and workers. From this group may come campaigners, VCFSE members, and representatives. Equally, they may continue simply playing an active role in the community.

How we went about it

Given the task and the likely divergence of views amongst stakeholders we used techniques that originated in the world of service design or 'design thinking'. This approach is set out in the diagram overleaf



A design approach to community engagement and development

As the graph above shows, we talked with 145 people in the research phase and then worked more deeply with many of them in the second, design phase of the review. It

should be emphasised at the outset there is no consensus on the experience to date nor on what to do next. There are a wide range of views, passionately held and in some cases quite entrenched. There is in addition an unfortunate focus, present throughout our work, that this is purely a debate about what to do with Local Community Networks (LCN's). For the avoidance of doubt, the review is about the work that Somerset Council does to engage and develop communities as a whole. That work involves many people and activities from the work that many services do to consult and work with communities, the work of village agents, the work of Connect Somerset and work done through the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCSFE) sector. Though not in scope, the review inevitably gathered views about the impact of this work whilst partner agencies are also trying to engage and develop the same communities.

What emerges overall that there is no shortage of effort or intention to both engage communities and work to help them to develop in Somerset. What we found is not a story of a lack of intention, integrity or indeed effort; rather it is a story of:

- a lack of joined up action,
- insufficient understanding of the impact those actions are having, a
- a difficulty in working well with what exists already rather than trying to create something new
- a difficulty in seeking the views, listening and responding to communities at a local level.

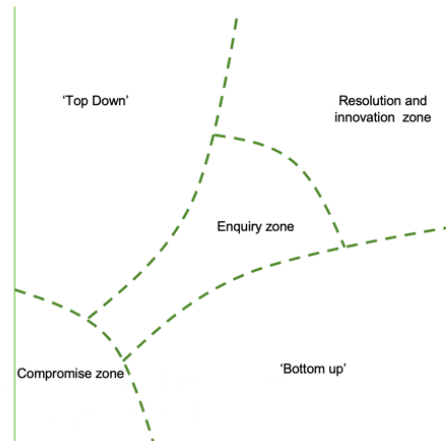
The choice now is between carrying on with a highly centralised system with weak communications links into and out of local areas, or pivoting toward a wholehearted, coherent and resourced commitment to developmental and preventative place-based working as a central plank in the Council's strategy. Such a shift would require an approach that is based on a:

- Shift in power, so that more is held and exercise locally
- Change in relationships, so they are more equal and valuable
- Movement in resources, so that more assets are owned by communities
- Redefinition of purpose, so that empowerment of communities is a central aim

Working with diverse views

Participants in the review varied hugely in what they wanted to see happen. This is unsurprising given the range of people consulted and engaged, but even within subgroups such as, City, Town and Parish Councillors, or SC Officers, it was difficult to identify wholly consistent views. In policy development work this presents a problem that can often be solved through compromise and the watering down of the tension to find an acceptable way forward, but in design thinking it creates an opportunity to develop 'both and' solutions; combining the suggested actions of a number of different schools of thought to generate options that taken together can achieve an innovative way forward. Though there are many nuances in each area of enquiry there was a central 'polarity', a tension between 'top down' and 'bottom-up' ways of thinking: Top-down solutions emphasise continuous boundaries, consistency, standardisation, a focus on needs and gaps and on creating new structures and meetings. Bottom-up solutions, emphasise emergence, variety, porous boundaries, working with what exists, and a focus on community assets, abilities and capacity.

Option A



Option B

As a general rule, in design thinking, solutions that favour one polarity heavily over another rarely work, indeed they have a tendency to create vicious cycles. So, standardisation becomes a constraint that people want to break free of, or emergence becomes chaos that people want to organise. The illustration shows a different approach, and this is how we worked in the workshops, where we enquired more deeply into what really matters, and took the best from each of the approaches in the hope of creating breakthrough practices that will yield a sustainable solution.

Anticipating the likely divergence of views amongst stakeholders, we used techniques that originated from service design or 'design thinking'. In design thinking, the presence of diverse views creates an opportunity to develop 'both and' solutions; combining the suggested actions of different perspectives to generate options that, taken together can lead to an innovative agreed way forward. In each section there is a structure that

- a) Defines the issue being considered
- b) Identifies the different views being expressed by respondents
- c) Explores in more depth the issues underlying the views people are expressing and
- d) Proposes a way forward that, where possible, represents the best of both worlds and accords with good practice in the view of the Citizen Network team.

Findings and recommendations

1. Strategic change and partnerships

This aspect of our work was centred around the extent to which the current arrangements enabled SC and its partners to work together in communities and with communities. These partners include those in statutory as well as VCFSE sectors. Both the research findings and subsequent discussions found the current situation to be sub-optimal; whilst all organisations are inputting significant effort to engage with communities to pursue common agendas many of the initiatives are separate from each other and do not take account of one another (see Findings of Research, 7.6 and 7.7).

The research found that

“From a range of partners there was a stated ambition for greater cross-sector collaboration to address community needs. There was already progression reported in data-sharing and the development of cross-sector datasets (PBS1/4). The main challenges identified by public sector partners were: different boundaries, different organisational geographies, and the need for trust and coordination.”

One interviewee from the Police said

“Our energy as a police service has just focused on dealing with the symptom rather than the underlying cause. And we're pretty good at dealing with the symptom because if someone goes shoplifting, we will go and nick [them] and we'll probably put them by the court and they'll probably be let out because actually it's just shoplifting... we're good at that bit. What we're trying to get better at is getting upstream and dealing with those underlying causes. (PBS4)”

There can be no doubt that at a national policy level prevention is a serious endeavour, but what emerges from our research is a confused picture of how all of this lands on the ground. The community experience is of being engaged separately by separate agencies all wanting to have broadly the same conversation but with different language and goals used (see Findings of Research, 7.1.2 and 7.8). The debate is to what extent this is a problem or inevitable consequence of 'silo' based initiatives driven from both national and county-wide standpoints.

Competing policy options emerging in the workshops have varied from a top-down approach that would seek to aggregate all initiatives and rationalise them, creating a planned and joined up approach to prevention. Others contend that this is not only impossible but would cut across much informal preventative activity in civic society as well as in the VCFSE sector.

A deeper dive into the enquiry zone of this issue reveals that prevention activity is now multi-system (in the sense that it is a duty on many statutory agencies) but the duty is still fragmented with at least five parallel prevention architectures:

- Health (NHS / OHID - Office for Health Inequalities and Disparities)
- Children & families (DfE / LA)
- Community safety (Home Office / Police)
- Fire & Rescue (risk-based prevention)
- Welfare / poverty (DWP / MHCLG)

From a ‘top down’ perspective what is missing nationally is:

- a single place-based prevention framework that draws the different strands together in places, and
- a shared outcomes model so that everyone is focused on the same goal in localities, and
- a pooled prevention investment model that identifies preventative spend and potential benefits.

A ‘bottom-up’ approach would require that work be carried out to identify and map as far as possible the capital that exists in communities, from universal provision that supports people in everyday life, to targeted provision that supports people in difficulty early to prevent escalation. The key is to bring these approaches together.

The “Living Well” pilots in the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership represent a leading example of place-based prevention in England, evolving from neighbourhood-level test models into the wider “Live Well” system approach. Initially, the pilots focused on delivering early intervention at a hyper-local level through multi-agency teams that brought together health services, local authorities, the VCFSE sector, and community organisations. Their core innovation was to shift away from traditional, service-led models—where individuals enter systems through thresholds and referrals—toward a community-led approach that emphasises early identification of need, social connection, and flexible, non-clinical support. This included roles such as community connectors and neighbourhood coordinators, working proactively with individuals and families who may not yet meet statutory thresholds but are at risk of escalation. The learning from these pilots has since been embedded into a broader system architecture across Greater Manchester, combining community-led prevention (for example through local funding to grassroots organisations), targeted early intervention programmes such as WorkWell, and integrated neighbourhood teams within the Integrated Care System. Collectively, this model seeks to address the root causes of poor health and inequality by aligning health, social, and economic support around people and places, reducing demand on acute services while strengthening community resilience

2.1 Strategic change and partnerships recommendations

We are aware that Somerset is making good progress with this integrated approach and we would encourage the continuation of this work. Our recommendations therefore relate to both the top-down systems leadership required to create a situation in which separate

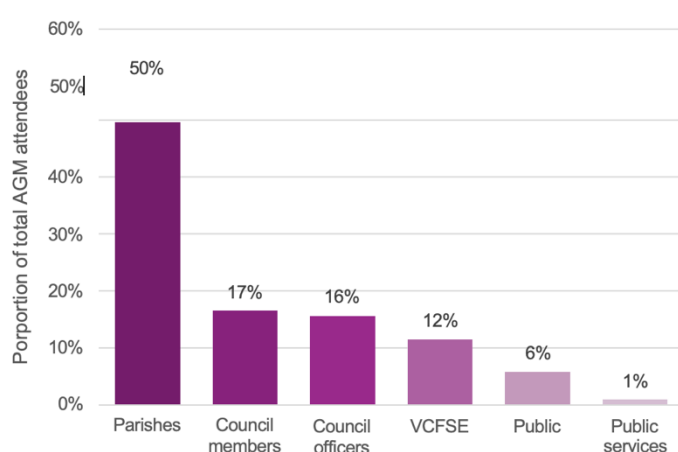
engagement is minimised and greater recognition of the 'bottom up' approach on which community capacity and voluntary activity is recognised, valued and built upon:

1. For all agencies to commit to an intentional, definitive and irreversible shift toward joining up attempts to eliminate preventable demand in service provision as a central plank in the future strategy of the Council and its partnerships.
2. For Somerset Council and partners to co-create a shared outcomes framework that enables a focus on common goals.
3. Somerset Council should recognise and place greater value on the role and contribution of the VCFSE sector in that journey by recognising its contribution and building on existing strengths.
4. To co-develop jointly investable initiatives that lead to greater resilience in communities.
5. To co-locate, where appropriate, services at a neighbourhood level.
6. To identify and build on the strengths and assets of communities.

2. Increasing community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery

Whereas the last section looked at the extent to which community engagement and development was shaped by strategic partnerships, this next section considers the extent to which communities views play a part in shaping the services that are provided by Somerset Council and its partner agencies.

Figure 6.1.1 Attendance at LCN AGMs by stakeholder group (n=416)



Following the creation of the new unitary Somerset Council it was hoped that Local Community Networks would compensate for the inevitable centralisation that resulted from the abolition of the 4 district councils and represent the views of more localised communities. This, in the view of many councillors, would help to rebalance the 'democratic deficit' that in their view was

created by the new Unitary council. Our research has found however that LCN's are not places that are currently engaging the community directly, as the graph shows (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1). The dominant group with LCN's is City, Town and Parish Councillors and it is highly variable the extent to which they in turn engage with communities to understand their ambitions and concerns.

It has been made clear to us in addition that much work to gather the views of people goes on outside LCNs through neighbourhood boards, area boards and through social interest groups. VCFSE representatives were keen to stress the vibrancy of community groups and their first-hand knowledge of their experience. Whilst we acknowledge they are embedded in communities; we would argue however that it is not the role of the VCFSE to gather and represent these views to policy makers in a place-based way.

There is evidence that the voice of local communities had a variable impact on service provision, with some services effectively involving communities, at least in some cases, whilst other services struggled or failed to engage (see Findings of Research, 6.1.3). There was little evidence the concerns, aspirations and experience of the areas covered by LCN's have had any particular visibility within Somerset Council.

Our conclusion is that it is SC, as the overall architect of this work, has a way to go to be:

- Effective in engaging the wider community and gathering the view of communities of place and of interest to inform its service design, policy initiatives and prioritisation.
- Organised to create interface points which allows views to be fed into decision making. Alongside community groups there are currently 18 LCN's all vying to get the attention of the host organisation which is not on the whole organised in a way that matches the locality geography. Link officers as the organisers of LCN's struggle to get traction in SC and feedback from council officers is that they find it hard to adequately service the desire from localities for dialogue.
- Though not uniform (indeed there are some good examples of services being open to feedback and co-design initiatives) this is far from the norm. There is a lack of consistent emphasis placed on co-design with communities and service users, and service designers themselves said that the perceived lack of effectiveness of the LCN's and other engagement vehicles is to some degree an issue of the way SC is structured. As one interviewee said:

You have education locality areas, which I think there are six of across the county. You have four one team areas²... and then you've got Local Community Networks ... again some overlap some don't and then ... 12 Connect Somerset areas, as well. So you've got a four or six, a 12, and an [18]. There we go. Work that one out for me. (VCF4; also CTP3)

The perceived lack of effectiveness of the current LCNs, both from those in them (who experience them as 'talking shops' with no real power) and those outside (who cannot see the value from the expenditure) has led for calls by some for them to be scrapped.

Whilst there are some very clear issues with the way that LCNs are configured, we would not at this stage recommend their abolition. LCNs need to be refreshed in terms of their function and renamed to break with a mixed past. However, they are the most obvious forum to comply with the neighbourhood governance mechanisms proposed under the

² We acknowledge that this situation has moved on since the research was conducted

English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill when it passes into law in the summer of 2026. They are the obvious basis of closer working with the NHS on a neighbourhood footprint and the basis on which SC could itself be structured. Many of the issues that LCNs face are not to do with the LCNs themselves but with the wider system they are trying to relate to, without changes in that, any new configuration will fail.

2.1 Increasing community participation to inform service strategy, development and delivery – Recommendations

7. Rename and refresh the LCNs as Community Forums, emphasising their role as bodies that bring (partners) together and stimulate activity rather than carry it out themselves.
8. Recognise that their role is not to engage the public directly but to gather together the outcomes of all community engagement activity to form a picture of the local area.
9. Refresh and revalue the role of Council link officers, as enablers of the more autonomous Community Forums, acting as catalysts in increasing engagement and co-development activity across the area.
10. Initiate a debate within SC as to whether it needs to restructure to better support place-based working at a neighbourhood level.
11. Ensure that SC and partners work to create a clearer relationship to a refreshed, more co-terminous locality geography.
12. Create a '**duty to co-design**' within Somerset Council services that stimulates changes in the culture of the organisation so that policy-making and service design is more attuned to local input and feedback.

3. The role of Somerset Council in working with communities

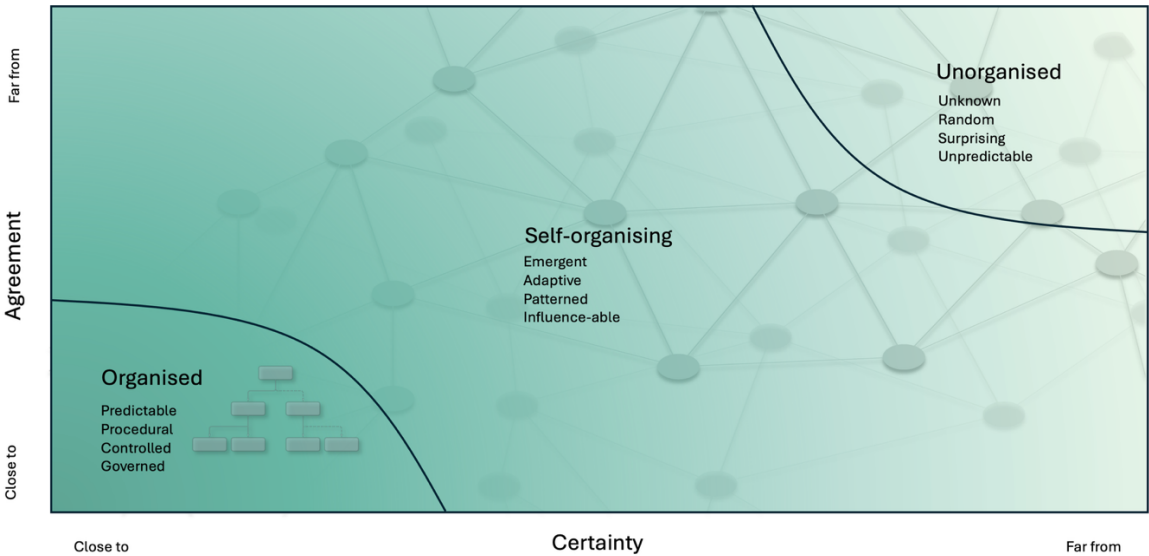
This section focuses on the nature of the relationship between SC and localities currently organised on the 18 LCN footprint.

The research findings and the subsequent workshop discussions revealed a perception, especially amongst representatives of the VCFSE sector, that the establishment of the LCNs had felt like something of an imposition that had either cut across or ignored existing networks and relationships. VCFSE attendance is the next to lowest category at Network meetings because, essentially, those in the sector felt little benefit from attending given the lack of perceived impact, benefit, or opportunity for networking (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1). Furthermore, the method used to run meetings, borrowing much from the committee management practices of the Democratic Services function, had also felt 'clunky'. There is a perception that culturally SC is 'unable to stop itself' from acting like it is trying to take over and organise activity that is essentially emergent, changeable,

organic and local.

Once again, the top-down vs bottom-up tension is clear in this debate. Whilst the views of the VCSFE clearly reflect their experience, any attempt to devolve Council decision making to a more local level requires that powers and responsibilities are exercised with due process and clear decision making and recording. Indeed the LCN's as conceived in the One Somerset business case were clearly intended to be part of the SC committee structure.

The situation then needs to be understood in the context of what happens in any system when linear and hierarchical structures meet the networked and organic components of a community. System thinkers such as Glenda Eoyang have illustrated this well, showing the interface between these organised, semi organised and unorganised elements. The organised space is within organisations, here there are clear structures and hierarchies, governance arrangements and procedures. The relevant participants can be convened and organised and boundaries are set and rigid. However, outside of this zone is an array of self-organising individuals and organisations who may sometimes operate out of awareness of each other, there may be some synergies, and also areas potentially of overlap and duplication. It is not fully possible to organise this zone, players come and go, it can be dynamic and fast moving. The unorganised zone is so called because we may not know of it until something triggers it to come into being or become known, often these are single issue lobby groups that form to oppose a development or policy proposal.



In our view, the only sustainable way forward is to equip communities with the tools and resources necessary to promote greater self-organisation, rather than to try and organise the community by trying to shoehorn the players into structures that undermine organic coherence. As Cormac Russel has said:

“Instead of asking how you or your organisation can create more value in communities, ask how you can create more space for communities to create what they value”

There are therefore a number of 'shifts' that SC needs to make to create the space that Russel is talking about. The first is to make an overt commitment to move from an

approach which aims to develop communities to one based on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and that means providing the tools necessary to enable localities to map the assets in their area. The asset categories are as follows:

Category	Description
Individual Assets (People)	Skills, talents, and capacities of residents
Associations (Community Groups)	Informal and voluntary groups where people come together
Institutions	Formal organisations with structured roles and resources
Physical Assets (Place)	Built and natural environment
Economic Assets	Local economic resources and flows
Cultural & Stories Assets	Shared identity, heritage, and narratives
Connections (Social Capital)	Relationships, trust, and networks between people
Digital Assets	Digital connectivity, tools, and skills

The second part of this shift is to redouble efforts to make relevant data and insights available in localities. Available data has developed significantly since the inception of the new unitary council but more needs to be done to integrate local knowledge and create relevant insight. Examples such as the [VCSFE Insights hub](#) or the [Frome Data Portrait](#) illustrate how useful this can be. Alongside this is the potential for Link Officers to support stakeholders in gathering further evidence where needed.

Combining these elements has the potential to enable localities if they choose to create 'Community Pictures'. Such pictures could set out the priorities for local areas and enable the tracking of key indicators to inform policy development and resource planning within Somerset Council, they could also give Councillors at a local level the means to advocate for their communities as well as give a common focus for local action. This would enable a shift in the relationship between neighbourhoods and the wider county and redress the balance between a county wide and locality focus that many believe was affected by unitarisation. Without them, as at present, there will be no way to understand the differing needs and priorities nor to track the fortunes of local areas.

3.1 The role of Somerset Council in working with communities - Recommendations

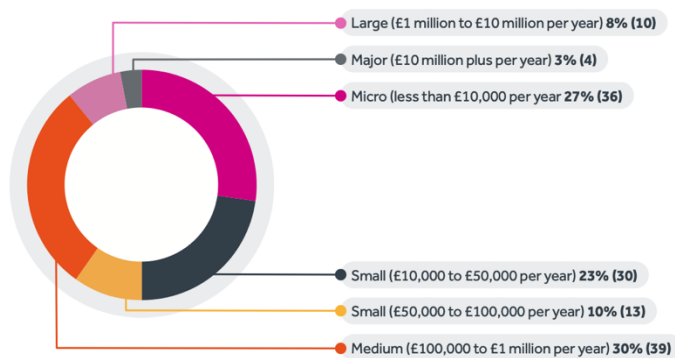
13. Make an intentional, definitive and irreversible shift toward strengths and assets based community development.
14. Provide places with the tools and ability to create asset maps that encompass all the

relevant assets in an area.

15. Make good on the initial promise to provide data sets and the ability to derive insights (using big data and AI based approaches) about the issues facing local areas.
16. Enable the opportunity for the creation of Community Pictures (should localities choose to develop them) that integrate other plans, gather information about the local situation and priorities and track progress in relation to identified priorities.

4. Supporting the Capacity of the Community Sector

Any consideration of community development must include the way in which VCFSE groups are supported. However, we are aware that this area has been the subject of considerable attention and debate recently (2024) culminating in a number of papers on the [state of the sector](#) and a Memorandum of Understanding that addresses the issues facing the VCFSE.



These papers set out the range of organisations that form the VCFSE sector in Somerset. The diagram shows the number by type using the National Council for Voluntary Organisations classification.

There is a clear shift in responsibility, which has

happened both through the impact of austerity as well as the desire to stimulate the activity and capacity of the sector, and this has created greater reliance on the VCFSE sector. This weighs particularly on the 'household name' organisations that NCVO would classify as 'major' or 'large' organisations. They do much of the heavy lifting that was once the province of statutory services. Reliance on these organisations has grown and will likely continue to grow. For these organisations the emphasis is on the need for long term funding certainty and commissioning arrangements based on outcomes that allow them to maintain their flexibility and values, as well as leverage their community roots and knowledge.

However, as the graphic shows over 60% of organisations are in the 'micro' to 'small' category. These are the kinds of organisations that the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham refers to as "Below the radar" organisations. The small, often unregistered, informal community groups, the ad hoc neighbourhood association, lunch club, mutual aid group, or single-estate residents' groups.

For both large- and small-scale organisations the research and the work carried out by Quay Research in 2024 referred to above, showed a continuing vulnerability to a set of dynamics driven in part by increasing need but also in the tendency of large-scale organisations to disrupt both the spirit and capacity of community organisations. This happens as a result of two factors, as the "[Challenge or Opportunity?](#)" paper states;

substitution and appropriation:

*“**Substitution** is what happens when VCFSEs step in to provide services that have traditionally been the responsibility of the government, becoming a societal ‘safety net’. One impact of this on the voluntary sector is increased demand, sometimes without a corresponding increase in funding which in turn adds to financial and operational stress. This happens because a service-user or client is ‘signposted’ to a particular organisation (e.g. by a social prescriber, Village and Community Agent, Parent or Family Support Advisor) without any funding to follow for VCFSE who ends up supporting that person”*

*“Alongside substitution is the linked problem of **appropriation**. National government, local authorities and the NHS wish to harness the qualities of flexibility, responsiveness and innovation through joint mechanisms for commissioning, service design and delivery, and service evaluation. While there is a rhetoric of working in partnership, the power relationships are far from equal. This is when partnership can rapidly tip-over into appropriation. A closer working relationship with government has brought increased bureaucratisation, greater expectations of service delivery, coverage, and control over client groups.*

Appropriation therefore refers to the integration or co-opting of voluntary sector resources, methods, or roles by the public sector with the specific result that the sector is required to meet the same demands on quality, consistency, accountability, governance, equity and access. This damages the impact of VCFSEs on the people and communities they seek to serve.”

What emerged in the research and in the workshops was a view that getting this right for both large and small scale organisations is still a work in progress (see Findings of Research, 6.3.2 and 7.3.2). Whilst predictability enables capacity; flexibility enables innovation. The system currently delivers neither well when in reality it needs to enable both. To help the work in progress we would make the following recommendations, many of which echo the findings and recommendations of the 2024 research.

4.1 Supporting the Capacity of the Community - Recommendations

17. Build a set of funding arrangements that enable stability where possible, flexibility where necessary
18. Focus on the commissioning of outcomes, not just service specifications to enable more groups and organisations to see their potential for involvement
19. Consider the introduction of a mixed funding model: core infrastructure funding and small, fast local grants.

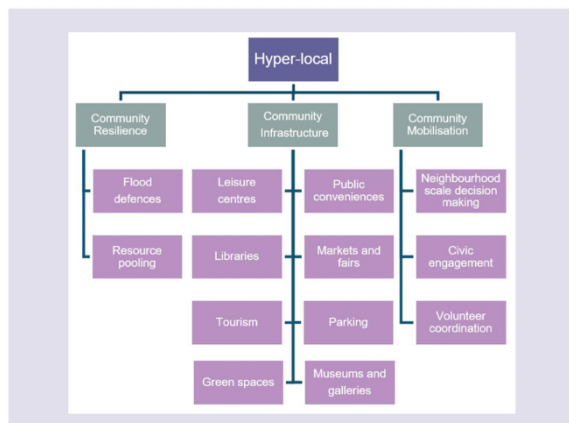
20. Change the language used in the process from “commissioner/provider” to “partner” where appropriate.
21. Invest in evaluations that capture relational and preventative value (impact and social value).
22. Make funding decisions transparent and place-aware, reflecting the value of networks and VCFSEs already present in the area.

5. Supporting communities to become more self-reliant

A vital element of the community engagement and development landscape is the issue of devolution. Both the business cases for the new unitary council envisaged devolution of assets, budgets and responsibilities to City, Town and Parish Councils, giving localities more control over assets that matter to communities. This agenda was given additional impetus by the financial crisis that SC faced in 2022 which resulted in the Leader of SC writing to City, Town and Parish Councils to offer the opportunity to propose a set of ‘deals’ that would see them taken on packages of a combination of services. The uptake was significant and has resulted in devolution deals with Bridgwater, Taunton, Yeovil, Minehead, Frome and Glastonbury to name a few. In all these places, devolution has resulted in significant increases in the precept levied on the general public.

The research and workshops acknowledged that it is both desirable and likely that there will be continued devolution to cities, towns and parishes and to community organisations

Figure 6: Powers of the hyper-local tier



as well. Many people foresaw this agenda gathering momentum as the real disposable income of SC continues to be diminished by the demand for social care services. Recent publications, most notably by the think tank Restate entitled ‘What Powers Where - achieving the devolution revolution’, envisaged a significant number of services being delivered at the ‘hyper-local’ level as the diagram shows.

But our research shows that though many are enthusiastic about the devolution

agenda overall, as many are cautious and nervous about accelerated or forced devolution against the wishes of localities or beyond their capacity to cope with it (see Findings of Research, 6.3.1 and 7.3.1). Such a situation will only serve to stress the parish sector, and a lack of adequate funding, whether transferred or raised locally will result in assets not being protected. For some there was a perceived risk of double taxation as precepts increased but the main council tax levels remained unchanged or increased.

As is by now a familiar theme, getting the balance right will be crucial if devolution is to remain a positive agenda. That positivity in our view comes when we see devolution not as a process of offloading SC assets to relieve its financial situation but as a choice

exercised locally where assets are part of the narrative of community development. Seen through this latter lens localities can use these assets as a catalyst for achieving better outcomes. Taking on parks and open spaces can become part of an agenda for greater biodiversity and health and fitness as well as for community participation. Taking on buildings creates the opportunity for better use by local communities, for health and well-being hubs or accommodation for VCFSE groups. Taking on 'streetscene' assets can be part of an opportunity for revitalising town and village centres. The key shift is a movement not only in resources but in the purpose for which these assets are used and where there is clear advantage for them to be owned and controlled locally.

To achieve this, actions need to create positive dynamics between SC and localities. The key factor is to offer the tools and resources to enable localities to make intentional and informed choices. This approach must include active community development support, helping places build the skills, confidence and infrastructure needed to take on responsibilities safely and fairly, and addressing practical barriers such as bureaucracy, risk management and legal compliance.

Further devolution therefore should happen at an agreed pace but in awareness of the financial position of SC. Agreements should be reached transparently and through negotiation, recognising that while national policy increasingly expects local authorities to enable local community control, different places have different levels of desire, capacity and readiness.

Decisions about devolution should therefore be aligned with:

- Local capability and leadership
- Prevention and long-term outcomes
- Sustainability over time

5.1 Supporting communities to become more self-reliant – Recommendations

23. Ensure that city, town and parish councils and community organisations have the tools to be able to develop devolution propositions.
24. Ensure that devolution 'deals' identify how assets can be better used locally and the difference these will make to outcomes for local people.
25. Continue with a negotiated approach to devolution where the onus is on localities to express and progress the agreements they want to make, and be clear that, over time, some responsibilities will be best placed at a locality level.
26. Adopt a graduated, capacity-sensitive devolution framework with a devolution list of items in tiers, starting small and simple and progressing to more complex deals where required.

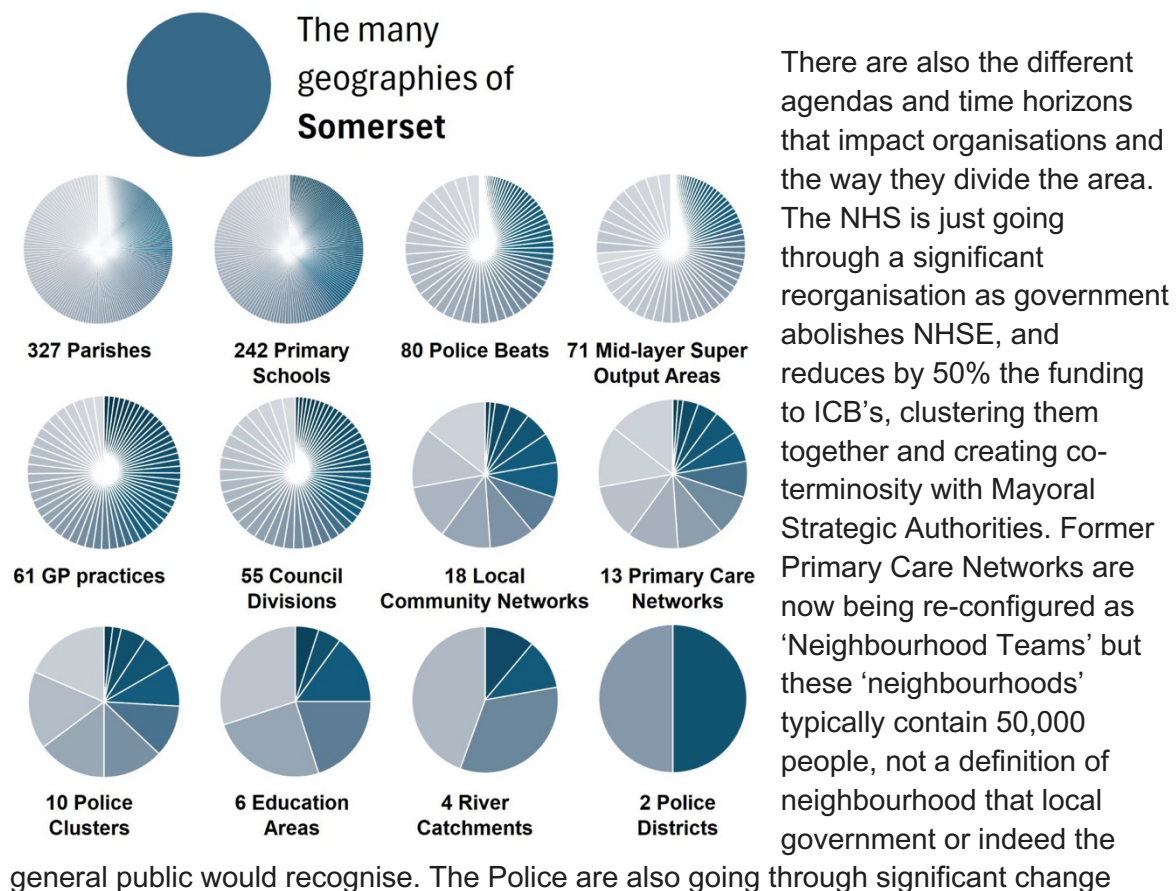
27. Support parish collaboration and VCFSE clustering, so that they can work together to take desired items forward.

6. Effective cross organisation and partner working in places

This section relates to the way in which SC chooses to divide the administrative county into a number of areas, which sets the geography within which agencies collaborate.

We are aware that much thought and not a little agonising went in the development of the boundaries that define the current LCNs. In the initial thinking, debate went back and forth about whether to mimic Primary Care Network boundaries, or whether to follow a more 'natural' or 'organic' set of geographies or whether to create fewer and larger boundaries to enable greater scale and potentially influence. In the end the 18 areas, the greatest number from the available options were selected to honour more natural geographies. Nonetheless our research shows that there is still some unhappiness with the way the boundaries have been drawn and indeed, for some, that they have been drawn at all (see Findings of Research, 6.1.1 and 7.3.1)

To further complicate matters, the current LCN boundaries are not the only boundaries. Different organisations have different ways of dividing the administrative county and different services within organisations have different ways still. The diagram illustrates this



with forces merging, Police and Crime Commissioners being abolished but their functions transferring to Mayoral Strategic Authorities. It is a complex and fast moving picture.

In our experience it is almost impossible to get this right. Every line on the map, no matter how carefully drawn creates a division that will advantage some agendas and disadvantage others. Inevitably therefore there are 'trade-offs'. Greater co-terminosity between organisations may positively enable greater influence over those organisations whilst negatively cutting across natural geographies and established co-operative relationships, undermining engagement and participation.

A further complication is that the research shows that some of the most effective formations for the current LCN's have not been geographic but thematic (see Findings of Research, 7.1.2). For example, Highways working groups have formed across SC and in some areas have led to the appointment of local 'stewards', posts jointly funded by collaborating city, town and parish councils. to carry out low level maintenance work that SC can no longer fulfil.

There are no complete solutions here and, country wide it is an issue that perplexes those who are trying to design the best way forward. Our view therefore is to enable different geographical relationships depending on the work that Community Forums believe they need to do.

Because of the relationship to the NHS and the need for the NHS and local government to work closely together in so many ways, to us it makes sense to align these geographies as much as possible. The large agencies need to consider each other as they reorganise and be as accommodating as possible as the prize from co-terminosity is arguably great. We have argued earlier in this document that part of the perception of LCN's as 'talking shops' is mostly to do with the fact that they have no clear structure to talk to. Greater co-terminosity would help to address that, as would a reorganisation of SC to relate better to local geographies.

However, it is also important that these boundaries do not limit other working relationships in different geographies should the situation demand it. Parishes for example wanting to develop active transport schemes will have an affinity with other parishes wanting to do the same. Equally issues like flooding will suggest an affinity with other places experiencing the same problem, these may or may not be geographically adjacent. This is also the case in education where neighbourhoods may want to have a relationship with Multi Academy Trusts, but their geographies and boundaries are highly unpredictable. There should be the opportunity for parishes to choose to work outside their given geography or to regard themselves as having multiple geographies depending on their focus.

So far our consideration has centred on the 'supply' or 'push' side of the equation; what service providing agencies do, how they measure their own success and how they shape their services and allocate their resources. However one reason why organisations work so much in silos is that their accountability is often toward central government departments. They look 'up not out' and they are driven by different missions which are pursued single-mindedly and sometimes at the expense of one another. One way to unite them may well be to find ways in which they have greater accountability to the locality. We suggested in section 3 above that neighbourhoods should have the opportunity to

draw together existing plans and data sets to create a unified Community Picture, and that this would set out the issues and priorities for the local area and allow progress (or decline) to be tracked. Currently there is no real visibility in any kind of joined up way of the state of local areas, this existed to some extent when District Councils were functioning, but nothing has replaced them though many of the building blocks already exist.

6.1 Effective cross organisation and partner working in places - recommendations

28. Redraw the geographies of the existing LCN's to create Community Forums coterminous with health reform, ensure that SC structure relates to this also.
29. Enable Community Forums to create arrangements to work with others depending on the issues they are trying to address.
30. Enable the new Community Forums to create (or develop from what already exists) if they so wish, a Community Picture that is based on data, insight and local knowledge that identifies priority actions for services working together in a local area, sets clear criteria for success and allows progress to be tracked.
31. Ensure a shift in accountability so that services are accountable to communities based on the Community Picture.

7. Support members and place-based officers in their community roles

This section relates to role of one of the central actors in community development and engagement, elected members. It also includes consideration of the role officers who have a role in engaging, convening and communicating with communities and between communities and SC. We shall consider each of these in turn.

Members considered themselves to be both conveyers of information to communities and advocates for them. They need local engagement arrangements to support them as they exercise their democratic responsibilities, not replace them or undermine them.

In all these regards members felt ill-equipped. The 'think member' initiative which, as we understand it, was supposed to inform members of developments and issues in their area is not as effective as it could be and so members often find themselves not knowing what to say about things the SC is doing that affect their wards.

Member engagement in the current community engagement arrangements is also not consistent. Some SC members find themselves with a number of LCN's to attend and this stretches capacity. When it comes to advocacy and representation, members often struggle to get any more traction than the LCN's themselves in talking with and influencing decision makers. The commentary on the lack of arrangements to feed in to the centralised SC structure afflicts members too.

When talking of members, we should be clear that we are not just talking about SC members. The current LCN set up is mostly populated by City, Town and Parish Chairs and members. This group feel particularly marginalised in the current arrangements and viewed as "amateurs" despite often having local and other expertise.

Some members at SC and parish level did have a positive experience and felt it was valuable when information shared proactively with councillors, enabling effective community leadership., when they felt their knowledge and experience of localities was valued.

This picture is about to be changed by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 which received Royal assent on the 29th April. The Act promises much but is short as yet on detail. However for unitary council members, there is a new duty to establish and participate in neighbourhood area committees or equivalent structures, with details still to emerge in regulations, but area committees are likely to be the primary vehicle for local accountability and community engagement, making the role of ward-level councillors in those structures more significant. All the signs are that rather than powers being devolved to these committees, certain (yet to be defined) decision making responsibilities will be devolved to local members sitting as members of those committees. For City, Town and Parish Councils Existing councils, their role in neighbourhood governance is protected under a new right to be engaged in representation on neighbourhood governance structures in their area.

For us, all this begs the question as to what methods can be used to engage with communities. As we have said throughout, the current arrangements for LCN's do not engage the public directly. There are examples of direct public engagement, but a question remains as to the legitimacy of the views being expressed without routes to dialogue with the public. We are seeing now the now the proliferation of online engagement platforms and their adoption across local government. Whilst recognising they are not accessible to all and should not therefore be used exclusively they are accessible to many and could play an important part, alongside more traditional methods in measuring sentiment, sourcing and testing ideas, and generally supporting the work of elected members.

There are of course other methods, and it is at this point it is helpful to include some consideration of the role of SC and other employed staff, who have a role in community development and engagement. These staff play various roles. In the LCN set up there are the LCN link officers, but there are others as well. Connect Somerset is a multi-agency early help partnership. Twelve 'Champions' hosted in community organisations, work across the county to join up public services and connect to the voluntary and community sector, improving the efficiency of how services work together. In addition, there is a group of Village Agents who are paid, individuals some of whom live in the parish "clusters" they support. They help to bridge the gap between isolated, excluded, vulnerable, and lonely individuals and statutory and/or voluntary organisations which offer specific solutions to identified needs. There are some 60 Agents working with Somerset's people and communities.

Given financial pressures, there is on the face of it there is an opportunity to potentially integrate and rationalise these roles. However they currently exercise very different functions in different geographies, so we would be wary of doing this though there may

be ways in time that these functions could coalesce.

If our recommendations for changing the name, geography and function of LCN's is accepted and acted upon their roles of existing link officers will be very different to now and these differences are spelled out in our recommendations

7.1 Support members and place-based officers in their community roles - Recommendations

32. Clearly define the member community leadership role in the approach, what they:

- can **influence** - their contribution to service and policy design,
- can **decide** - (delegation under Clause 60 of the EDCP Act for Somerset councillors) that can be influenced through local engagement
- can **escalate** - their role in service issues and individual cases (what intelligence do members hold that the system currently loses?)

33. To provide support for members to gauge sentiment and test ideas in order to better evidence local ambitions and opportunities.

34. Recognise and refresh the role descriptions of Link Officers so that they can

- Be strategic not just operational
- Develop and coordinate of the production of any Community Picture
- Provide Strategic support for members in their divisional role engagement across their area
- Help their allocated Neighbourhood Forum decide with which other Community Forums they should work to address issues relevant to their area
- Gather and communicate available local data and insight
- Map current community engagement activity and promote further activity by organisations in the area
- Gather available local plans and strategies
- Build trust at a local level

Conclusions

When Somerset Council was created as a new unitary authority it set out ambitious plans to both engage and develop communities. It invested in the approach which had many facets, including the appointment of teams of people to work directly with communities and the establishment of new forums to bring people together to be a local voice and a means for influencing SC policies and decisions. Speaking to the individuals involved we have no doubt this was done in good faith.

However, the context was and is difficult. Funding reductions and increased demand led to pressure on services, and this had a knock on effect on VCFSE and communities who have had to do more for themselves. To make matters more complicated, this happened at a time when some communities themselves were agitating to own more in terms of assets and do more in terms of initiatives and influence. This combination of having to do more sometimes and wanting to do more at others, has created a real issue in the system which is present throughout our work. It is this that has exacerbated the fundamental tension of 'top down' approaches that seek to standardise and rationalise and impose arrangements, and 'bottom up' approaches which reflect variety and difference in preferences and develop relationally and organically.

From the perspective of the community and of the VCFSE community, our research shows, the experience has been perplexing. Different agencies and sometimes different departments within those agencies have driven their own individual approaches, bodies have been formed that seem to want to have the same dialogue with the same communities and this has limited the value that is available to communities and lessened the benefit that SC and its partners derive. Local Community Networks were one of the major elements in the work and it was hoped that they would play a key role in engaging and developing communities. They have had some success, and the annual reports of their activity to date show that they have made a real difference in enhancing co-operation between agencies and in providing a focus for local relationships and activity.

However during the course of our work the spotlight has shifted from LCNs and other community convening bodies toward the culture and structure of the Council it is trying to influence. In a way it would not matter what the membership, terms of reference and resources of the local body are so long as there are limited points of connection into the Council and the prevailing culture does not seek or value these views. This is a system issue more than it is a local issue.

We acknowledge however that cultures evolve as a response to dilemmas and in the face of financial pressure it is not uncommon for councils to close down channels to protect themselves from demand, but when the future sustainability of the organisation is based on developing community capacity, and local bodies are the gateway to that, then a better resolution is needed. Asset transfer, asset based community development, user experience to co-design services, local knowledge to focus service interventions, local data and evidence to describe the need and impact are all vital to the future of council and community alike.

Beyond this key dilemma there are other issues that our work uncovers that also need attention. With the best of intentions, the design of the 'interface' between council and community has landed awkwardly in some places, sometimes supplanting already existing relationships and ignoring others. It is for this reason that we believe the LCN's need to be refreshed and renamed. They do not themselves interact with communities to any great degree, they are however the place where people active in communities can come together, and hence they should aim to gather, make sense of, and action the sum of local engagement activity in an area. It is for this reason we recommend a change in the name to become Community Forums with new terms of reference and a link officer who has a different remit to the present. We believe that these forums would benefit from developing what we are calling 'community pictures'; based on available data and evidence, pulling together the plans and strategies that exist in an area, and naming the

key areas for action. This will have the huge benefit of creating greater accountability of agencies to the local area. We reflect in the report that the attention of organisations is often 'up' (toward government departments or inspectorates) and not 'out' toward the communities they serve. This is not an attempt to create formulaic plans, the public sector is overwhelmed by the sheer number of plans it has, but without some documented sense of what is happening in an area, it is impossible to determine how things are, whether things are getting better or worse, and, crucially, to have any coherent focus beneath a Somerset Council geography, on a local area. It is the declared intention in the business case for the new unitary council that alongside the inevitable centralisation that goes with joining together 5 councils, there would be an opportunity to decentralise decision making and devolve assets, our recommendations seek to make good on that promise.

Another key area has been geography. The division of the local community networks into 18 areas in terms of the LCNs and other geographies that exist within the council and partner organisations, have been the source of controversy. The lack of co-terminosity places a strain in particular on those that have to engage with them, adding to the sense of officer overwhelm when it comes to community engagement. Driven as these divisions often are by different agendas emanating from central government, it is almost impossible to find a 'solution' to this. Rather than wait for the one great rational solution that will likely never come, we are recommending that whilst there needs to be greater co-terminosity particularly with the boundaries emerging in the NHS, that city, town and parish councils, and VCSFE groups should be free to work with other geographies depending on the issue. Boundaries should be 'tools not rules' and we should see more issue based working, especially as this has proved a productive avenue thus far.

Finally we should bear in mind at all times that locality working exists to enhance democratic processes and decision making. Local members of Somerset Council and those from city, town and parish levels should all find this supports their ability to engage with and represent their local areas, to champion their cause and to influence policies for the better.

Community engagement and development is a never ending journey, it is unlikely that we will ever say, it is done. The journey is an iterative one, trying something, listening, learning, refining and changing. This report reflects on what for many people has been a huge effort, progress is being made, structures are in place and can be changed, roles have been developed that can be refined. Where all this ends up however is in a number of cultural challenges that result in a particular distribution of power and resources, a particular view of the purpose of public sector organisations and a set of unequal relationships. It is changing these things that represents the real challenge and defines where community engagement and development needs to go next.

List of recommendations

1. For all agencies to commit to an intentional and definitive and irreversible shift toward joining up attempts to eliminate preventable demand in service provision as a central plank in the future strategy of the Council and its partnerships.
2. For Somerset Council and partners to co-create a shared outcomes framework that enables a focus on common goals.
3. Somerset Council should recognise and place greater value on the role and contribution of the VCFSE sector in that journey by recognising its contribution and building on existing strengths.
4. For Somerset Council and its partners to co-develop jointly investable initiatives that lead to greater resilience in communities.
5. To co-locate, where appropriate, services at a neighbourhood level.
6. To identify and build on the strengths and assets of communities.
7. Rename and refresh the LCNs as Community Forums, emphasising their role as bodies that bring (partners) together and stimulate activity rather than carry it out themselves.
8. Recognise that their role is not to engage the public directly but to gather together the outcomes of all community engagement activity to form a picture of the local area.
9. Refresh and revalue the role of Council link officers, as enablers of the more autonomous Community Forums, acting as catalysts in increasing engagement and co-development activity across the area.
10. Initiate a debate within Somerset Council as to whether it needs to restructure to better support place-based working at a neighbourhood level.
11. Ensure that Somerset Council and partners work to create clearer relationships for a refreshed, more co-terminous locality geography
12. Create a 'duty to co-design' within Somerset Council services that stimulates changes in the culture of the organisation so that policy-making and service design is more attuned to local input and feedback.
13. Make an intentional, definitive and irreversible shift toward strengths and assets based community development.
14. Provide places with the tools and ability to create asset maps that encompass all the relevant assets in an area.
15. Make good on the initial promise to provide datasets and the ability to derive insights (using big data and AI-based approaches) about the issues facing local areas.

16. Enable the opportunity for the creation of Community Pictures (should localities choose to develop them) that integrate other plans, gather information about the local situation and priorities and track progress in relation to identified priorities.
17. Build a set of funding arrangements that enable stability where possible, flexibility where necessary
18. Focus on the commissioning of outcomes, not just service specifications to enable more groups and organisations to see their potential for involvement.
19. Consider the introduction of a mixed funding model: core infrastructure funding, small, fast local grants and.
20. Change the language used in the process from “commissioner/provider” to “collaborator/partner” where appropriate.
21. Invest in evaluations that capture relational and preventative value (impact and social value).
22. Make funding decisions transparent and place-aware, reflecting the value of networks and VCFSEs already present in the area.
23. Ensure that city, town and parish councils and community organisations have the tools to be able to develop devolution propositions.
24. Ensure that devolution ‘deals’ identify how assets can be better used locally and the difference these will make to outcomes for local people.
25. Continue with a negotiated approach to devolution where the onus is on localities to express and progress the agreements they want to make, and be clear that, over time, some responsibilities will be best placed at a locality level.
26. Adopt a graduated, capacity-sensitive devolution framework with a devolution list of items in tiers, starting small and simple and progressing to more complex deals where required.
27. Support parish and VCFSE collaboration and clustering, so that they can work together to take desired items forward.
28. Redraw the geographies of the existing LCN’s to create Community Forums coterminous with health reform, ensure that SC structure relates to this also.
29. Enable Community Forums to create arrangements to work with others depending on the issues they are trying to address.
30. Ensure that any Community Picture identifies priority actions for services working together in a local area, sets clear criteria for success and allows progress to be tracked.
31. Ensure a shift in accountability so that services are accountable to communities based on the Community Picture

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