

NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL DECISION



DECISION OF: COUNCILLOR MIKE BELL, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND CABINET MEMBER FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

IN CONSULTATION WITH: COUNCILLOR CATHERINE GIBBONS, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND MANDY BISHOP, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

WITH ADVICE FROM: THE HEAD OF SUSTAINABLE PLACES

DECISION NO: 25/26 HSC 172

SUBJECT: CONSULTATION ON EXPANSION OF WECA TO INCLUDE NORTH SOMERSET

KEY DECISION: NO

REASON: Not of significant impact to two or more wards at this stage of the process – decision to proceed with membership or not will follow after consultation stage

BACKGROUND:

1. Context

This Decision Notice follows the report and resolutions of Council on 16th September, which included to:

1. *Approve that the Council begin a formal process towards potential membership of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), subject to the requirements set out in section 3 of the report.*
2. *Delegate authority to the Leader of the Council, in consultation with the Deputy Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive, to:*
 - (i) *Seek a devolution proposal for membership of WECA that was in the interests of North Somerset residents, businesses and partners.*
 - (ii) *Approve the preparation of devolution and public consultation on the formal devolution proposal and associated documentation.*

Noting that the outcomes of the consultation would revert to Council for consideration prior to any formal submission of the devolution proposal to government....

See: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s7777/09%2025.09.16%20Council%20report%20on%20WECA%20membership%20process%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Section 3 of the report set out the process required for membership, which includes:

- The production of a 'proposal', setting out the intended change for the Combined Authority / WECA and the rationale as to why this is to be considered.

- Formal public consultation on the proposal across North Somerset and the WECA constituencies, for a minimum of eight weeks.

2. Devolution proposal

A draft Devolution Proposal has been drawn up by WECA and North Somerset officers and will be reviewed by the WECA Committee on 31st January (see Appendix 1 of report at <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s10917/Item%2013%20-%20Expansion.pdf>), requesting their support.

The draft Proposal sets out:

- What the West of England Combined Authority is, why expansion to its geography is being sought, and how our governance currently operates.
- Principles, ambition and vision from the future, aligning closely to the position the Mayor, Committee and the Leader of North Somerset Council set out in the West of England Growth Strategy.
- A regional evidence base showing why expansion would have a positive economic impact for North Somerset and the existing WECA region.
- Strategic priorities an expanded WECA would focus on, again, aligning to the recently agreed West of England Growth Strategy.
- How partnerships will be refreshed to reflect any expansion to WECA.
- Future devolution opportunities that would be open to WECA (and North Somerset if a member), highlighting the additional functions and funding opportunities that the expanded WECA would ultimately have access to.
- That implementation would take place following the completion the legislative process and that all relevant documentation, decision making arrangements, Committees and other collaboration forums would be revised to ensure North Somerset became full partners of WECA.

The Devolution Proposal is supported by a letter from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Devolution, Faith and Communities, which sets out a range of measures to support the proposed WECA expansion / NSC membership. This includes funding being made available of £15m capital and £1m capacity.

This Decision Notice requests support to proceed to consultation substantively on the basis of the Devolution Proposal set out in the WECA report, subject to minor editorial changes.

3. Public consultation

A variety of consultation materials are being prepared alongside the Devolution Proposal to help facilitate an open and informed consideration of the issues involved.

These are expected to include but are not limited to:

- Explanatory materials for consultation webpage.
- Explainer animation: will sit at the top of the consultation webpage and used on socials.
- Shorter cuts of the animation: three or four 30-second snippets that can be used on socials.
- Online consultation webpage.

- Printed version of the consultation: with a graphic designer to make a questionnaire style booklet version. This will be distributed in physical locations around the region.
- 1-pager version of the consultation: can be printed and used to advertise the consultation in community centres, libraries etc.
- Social media graphics: taken from animation design.
- Slide deck: to be used for briefing partner organisations like parish councils, youth parliament etc.
- FAQ document.

These will be supplemented by briefings and explanatory materials specific to North Somerset, which will be used at North Somerset engagement events with stakeholders including Town and Parish Councils, business groupings, young people and the voluntary and community sectors. A Facebook Live event or equivalent is proposed with the WECA Mayor and Leader of North Somerset Council.

The main consultation will be hosted on the WECA website (or via an alternative portal established by WECA). Respondents are expected to be asked for the first section of their postcode so that outcomes / data can be assessed for any differentials between the responses from within different parts of WECA or North Somerset.

Consultation questions as currently proposed are:

1. To what extent do you support the proposal to expand the West of England Combined Authority to include North Somerset and why?
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across a wider Combined Authority area will support economic growth and improve public services in the region?
3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across a wider Combined Authority area will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect the diverse identities of our region?
4. What additional benefits do you think can be achieved through an expanded West of England Combined Authority? How can these be maximised?
5. What activities and projects would you identify as priorities for an expanded WECA?
6. Do you have any concerns about the expansion proposal? If so, what could be done to help address those concerns?

Questions 1 – 3 are proposed to take the form of drop down options with space for free text responses. Questions 4 – 6 are proposed to be free text only.

The questions may be refined further prior to publication but are expected to take substantively the form above.

The consultation is expected to commence in early February for a period of at least six weeks. The outcomes will then be considered by Full Council as part of determining whether or not to proceed with the membership proposal.

DECISION:

- i. To approve the draft Devolution Proposal in the form substantively set out in Appendix 1 of the report at <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s10917/Item%2013%20-%20Expansion.pdf> as the basis for public consultation on North Somerset Council membership of the West of England Combined Authority, subject to minor editorial amendments.
- ii. To approve the proposals for public consultation on the Devolution Proposal as set out in Section 3 above.

REASONS:

- To enable public consultation to proceed on the proposal for North Somerset Council (NSC) to join the West of England Combined Authority (WECA).

OPTIONS CONSIDERED:

- Not to proceed with the consultation: this is not recommended, as would not enable the public to engage on the question of WECA membership in a formal / structured manner.
- To propose a different form or content of Devolution Proposal: not recommended. The document as currently drafted sets out the considerations required for this consultation in an appropriate manner and reflects the contents of discussions between the two authorities.
- To develop an alternative form of consultation and associated materials: not recommended. The current proposals for consultation have been worked on jointly by WECA and NSC officers and have been informed by input from Cabinet Members and a Member Advisory Group.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The consultation process will incur some minor costs for both WECA and North Somerset. These can be covered by the £1m capacity funding provided by government to support the membership process and/or by Transformation Funding made available within NSC to support proposals for WECA membership.

LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS

The membership / expansion process includes a statutory requirement for public consultation, which the proposals in this paper are designed to meet.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The consultation process does not have direct environmental implications. Consultation and responses will be directed as far as possible via digital channels.

CONSULTATION

Public consultation proposals are as set out in this report. They have been informed by discussions with CLT, Cabinet Members and a Member Advisory Group including the Leaders or Deputy Leaders of each of the political parties.

PROCUREMENT

N/a

RISK MANAGEMENT

Risks of the membership process were detailed in the Council report of 16th September.

EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

The consultation will be designed to be accessible for all, including for example those who are visually impaired or digitally excluded.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

The details of the consultation proposals have been led by the Head of Sustainable Places alongside the Head of Communications and Engagement, with input from Cabinet Members, the Member Advisory Group and colleagues from across the council.

APPENDICES

N/a

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Council report, 16th September 2025: <https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s7777/09%202025.09.16%20Council%20report%20on%20WECA%20membership%20process%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

WECA Committee report, 31st January 2026: <https://westofengland-ca.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s10917/Item%2013%20-%20Expansion.pdf>

SIGNATORIES:

DECISION MAKER(S):

SIGNED:  Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Strategic Partnerships, Finance, Digital and Corporate Services.

Date: 5 February 2026

IN CONSULTATION WITH:

Signed:  Deputy Leader of the Council

Date: 5 February 2026

Signed:  Chief Executive

Date: 5 February 2026