

North Somerset Council Executive Committee
17 September 2024 at 3:30pm

As you may recall I addressed the Exec on the 17th July this year, to request in the strongest possible way that NSC declare a Food Security Emergency within the Local Plan, in parallel to the existing Climate Emergency that has already been declared, on the bases that you really can't have one without the other. I had a reply just yesterday indicating that the NPPF Planning Officers are carefully considering this, as it will not only affect housing numbers, but introduce new legislation, for local renewable energy generation, which in turn, could impact localised food production and farmland.

I thank you for reviewing this important issue carefully, and look forward to seeing a robust directive to protect and enhance Food Security and Farming, in the finalised Local Plan. This is particularly important as it appears absent from the current proposal to be reviewed today regarding WECA. In addition, I would like to inform the exec that in discussing this issue with constituents, there is an appetite to protect our Food Security and Farmers, as indicated by these signatures that have been petitioned, where well over 100 people support the declaration. To be honest, I could have got many many more, as virtually everyone I spoke to agrees.

In today's agenda papers, NSC is making decisions based on its current financial context and ambition. Appendix 1, recommends two actions... that NSC will join WECA and have a mayor. I'm concerned how this affects local democracy and what powers NSC residents may lose.

Regarding the government's one billion pound devolution in 2016, the council chose not to join a regional authority. The Leader Nigel Ashton said, "any future "resources or powers" would be controlled autonomously by the proposed mayor leaving the local authorities "with no say in it whatsoever".

" When one Welsh authority held a referendum in 2004, over 70% of the voters voted against the proposal to have a mayor. Other councils, like North Somerset Council, may only have had a consultation.

This current recommendation to join WECA looks like centralisation rather than devolution. The decision making process would be further away from constituents and councillors as Local democracy may only be made regionally.

In March this year, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities stated, "Ministers are concerned as to the West of England Combined Authority's capacity to comply with its Best Value Duty... including the poor state of professional relationships between the WECA Mayor and the representatives of the constituent members. Following inconsistent action against highlighted concerns, the government issued a 12 month Notice, that is still in place. Public clarity and transparency is needed to understand the relationship, responsibilities, liabilities and powers between NSC, WECA, its mayor, including the likes of Homes England and Bristol Temple Quarter as indicated on Companies House.

Your report today says the government, advised that their devolution ambition is to devolve new powers to regions based on certain mayoral conditions. This implies only regions with a mayor, like WECA, would gain new powers, not North Somerset Council or the people it represents. It is not appropriate to reduce local democracy due to a temporary financial situation.

So my question is: What are the disadvantages of having a regional WECA mayor? What powers will local people lose? Will NSC have a referendum on joining WECA and having a mayor, as recommended in Appendix 1?

NSC video of [Public Question](#) (at 16mins) and [NSC discussion](#) (at 21mins)