



North Somerset could join West of England Combined Authority

12th September

NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL

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Dan Norris, the elected metro mayor of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). (Image: John Wimperis)

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North Somerset Council is exploring options for devolution deals after Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner wrote to council leaders across the country about the new Labour government's "most ambitious programme of devolution this country has ever seen" and urged councils to join combined authorities.

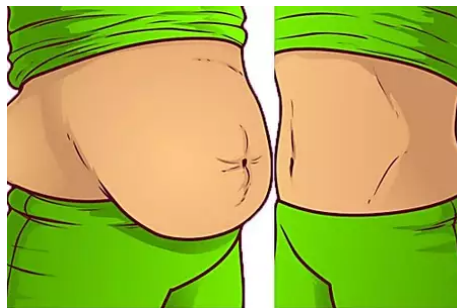
A response to the letter, set to be signed off the council's executive at its meeting on Tuesday, September 17, will set out that North Somerset's preferred option is to pursue a future with the West of England.

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This could see an "expansion to include **North Somerset**" of the combined authority — but the council will also explore devolution without a mayor in dialogue with the government.

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) was created in 2017.

It takes charge of some large strategic areas such as transport and is run by an elected metro mayor, currently Dan Norris who — since this year's general election — has also been the MP for North East Somerset and Hanham.

Made up of Bristol, South Gloucestershire, and Bath and North East Somerset, the combined authority would have loosely reunited the former county of Avon — but North Somerset Council declined to join.

But now being outside the combined authority could see the council lose out on funding.

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In her letter to council leaders, Ms Rayner said: “While we will not force places to take on a metro mayor, we will not shy away from making the case for their huge advantages, with some powers continuing to be reserved for institutions with directly elected leaders, such as mayoral combined authorities.”

Although North Somerset **did not join the West of England Combined Authority** and was not a part of its main committee, it sat on the authority’s “joint committee” and still benefited from funding through the Local Economic Partnership which allowed it to work with the combined authority on a host of projects including Metrowest and the — now threatened — reopening of the Portishead railway. But now these partnerships are ending.

A report set to go before the council’s executive warned: “The critical point here is that North Somerset will no longer be able to access funding through this route, which over the past decade has run into hundreds of millions of pounds and that both the previous and current government are clear that accessing similar funding will be through devolution.”



Mike Bell, leader of North Somerset Council. *(Image: Bristol Live/LDRS)*

North Somerset Council leader Mike Bell said: “The council is ambitious to promote further growth and reduce inequality for North Somerset residents but to do that we need new sources of funding and more local control.

“If we want to have the same opportunities as other parts of the country, accessing more powers for North Somerset and our region, then we need to be looking to secure a deal that works for us and for the established West of England Mayoral Combined Authority.

“North Somerset, like many parts of England, has missed out on the opportunities of devolution.

“Now is the right time for us to seize them and help grow our economy, create new jobs and build enduring partnerships with our neighbours.”

Although the county of Avon only existed from 1974 until 1996, the four successor councils continue to collaborate in various areas and its name lives on in regional bodies such as the Avon and Somerset Police and the Avon Fire and Rescue Service.

North Somerset Council added that the area had a “shared economic geography” as well as established cultural and transport links.

explored as our preferred option.

“We do not rule out alternative options in the event this becomes undeliverable.”

In December, it was suggested that North Somerset could join a “Wessex” devolution bid with Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole.

Mr Bell said at the time: “We’re exploring all options to benefit our residents but very informal at this stage.

“Just to be clear, all options includes WECA. But we have to play the cards we’re dealt.”

North Somerset Council stated that it would engage with partners, residents and businesses on any devolution proposals as they progress.

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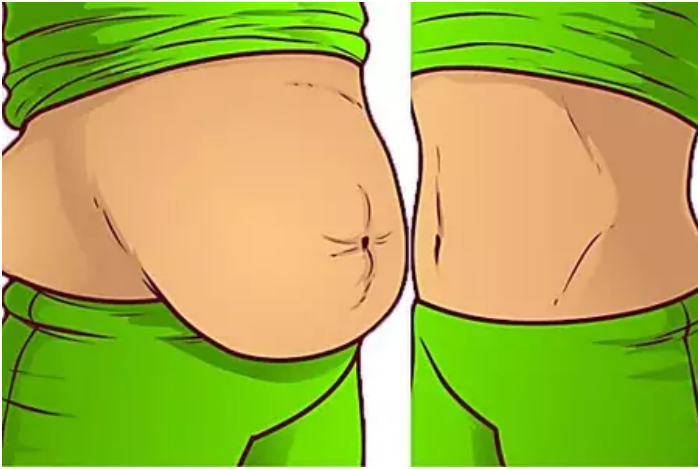
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