

To: Somerset District Council Leaders

Please ask for: David Fothergill

Email: djafothergill@somerset.gov.uk

Date: 30th April 2021

Dear Leaders,

Thank you for your letter of 22nd April in response to the questions I raised in my letter to you of 9th April. Somerset County Council has considered this matter carefully. It has received legal advice and it has taken into account the contents of the Secretary of State's letter of 12th April.

Somerset County Council will not be participating in or endorsing this exercise and I set out the reasons for this below.

We do not agree with your suggestion that the consultation model used by the Government is flawed, unfair or unfit for purpose. This is the same approach that the Government is currently using in other areas across England both now, and in the recent past, without complaint.

We do not agree that certain groups, either parish and town councils or residents, were excluded from having a say. They were not. Everyone had an equal opportunity to make their views known using a process that was easy and simple to understand and use. The county council received not one inquiry or complaint from anyone saying that they felt excluded or were denied an opportunity to have a say. You have consistently used this point as justification for going down this path but have provided no evidence from residents or others to show they felt excluded or of the numbers involved.

The Secretary of State made clear that conducting such an exercise will play no role in assisting him in making his decision. He also makes clear that any decision was never going to be taken on a simple show of support, nor has this ever been the approach in any other area that has undergone local government reorganisation in recent years.

This then dismisses the justification that you have advanced, that conducting such an exercise would assist the Secretary of State in making his decision. It will not. Indeed, he makes clear that his decision may well have been taken before the end of your proposed exercise. He also makes clear that he believes such an exercise would disrupt and undermine the Government's own consultation.

The county council, like all of us in public life, has a fiduciary duty around the use of public funds. We simply could not justify contributing to spending over £1million of public money on publicity on an exercise that is outside of the formal consultation and will not be recognised by the Government. These are public funds that could be spent on front line services or in supporting our communities in their recovery from the pandemic.

We believe that there are very real concerns around how any exercise as you propose could be considered impartial given how this is being presented and the information that your councils have already sent out to households across the county. Your letter of April 28 and communication of April 30 with the proposed information for voters leaflet confirms this and demonstrates quite clearly that your poll is biased and designed in your favour. We do not authorise use of either the Somerset County Council logo or the One Somerset logo or any other branding implying our involvement in this exercise. Any use or suggestion of involvement and endorsement will be viewed as a clear misrepresentation.

Since launching your proposed poll on April 6, you have adopted excluding behaviours throughout. Two examples; you designed and launched your biased proposal with no engagement with us whatsoever; when asked for clarification on fundamentally important aspects of your proposal you failed completely to answer the questions or engage with us. In short, you have demonstrated through your actions your determination to mislead the people of Somerset.

We feel therefore that this is an exercise that will add no value to the Secretary of State's decision, as he has been very clear about, will confuse people and undermine the Government's consultation process. We regret the actions of the district councils if you decide to proceed, and we feel that there is a very real risk that such a move will diminish the standing and trust of local government in the county as a whole.

Finally, we believe that the time has come to bring the county together and to start the preparation for implementation of the Secretary of State's decision, whatever the outcome. There is much we can and should be doing now to ensure that Somerset can be in the best possible position to move forward collectively and are ready to make the necessary changes.

We would welcome your support in this work at any time.

Given his ongoing involvement in this matter, I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Fothergill', with a long horizontal line extending to the right below the name.

Cllr David Fothergill
Leader of Somerset County Council

cc. Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government