



16<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Colleague,

**Local Government Reorganisation and claims made by Stronger Somerset**

As you will be aware, the Government is currently consulting on two potential options for local government reform in the county.

Somerset County Council's (SCC) proposal is called One Somerset and would see the four district councils and the county council replaced with a single new unitary authority. So, replacing five existing councils with one new organisation. The district councils' proposal, Stronger Somerset, would replace Somerset's existing five councils with two new unitary authorities in the east and west of the county, a separate children's services alternative delivery model, a shared services company, and a combined authority for the area. So, replacing five existing councils with five new organisations.

It is important that this debate is based on objective facts, the available evidence and, of course, the truth. Regrettably, I am aware that on 4th March you received a letter from the four district council leaders that contained a series of misleading and inaccurate claims about the county council's One Somerset proposal.

Our concerns have been made clear to the district councils, who have been asked to withdraw the accusations, and to the Government.

It is important that such mistruths are rectified promptly and accurately, and I am therefore setting out clarifications on each point below.

1. The claim that "despite reaching agreement last year that a single unitary model was not the right choice for Somerset and agreeing that all councils should work more collaboratively, the county council walked away and launched its own proposal". This is inaccurate and incomplete and is misleading record of events.
2. The claim that a single unitary county will be the size of 'Luxembourg' is emotive and seeks to deliberately mislead. A single county unitary for Somerset will be similar in size to many other county unitaries that are already in place.
3. The claim that a single county unitary will be a "monolithic council run from Taunton" is misleading and inaccurate and shows no regard for the vision that is

publicly available and clearly set out in the One Somerset business case. It will be a new, modern unitary council run from offices throughout the county and based upon locality-based community networks, local relationships and solutions.

4. The claim that the One Somerset proposal to reduce the number of elected members to 100 would result in an average representation of 5,630 per councillor compared to 3,150 for the rest of England is both inaccurate and misleading. The One Somerset proposal for 100 members results in 4,302 electors per member which benchmarks closely with recent Local Government Boundary Commission for England reviews in unitary county areas. The comparison with the English average of 3,150 is misleading as this includes lower tier, small district councils. The correct comparator group would be to other rural unitary councils.
5. The statement that "Somerset lags behind other parts of the UK in a number of areas and some local services, such as social care, are unsustainable" is inaccurate and seeks to deliberately mislead. Social services in the county are sustainable, fully funded and we are even able through outstanding budgetary management to invest an additional £10m in 2021-22 budget for adult social care.
6. The claim that the One Somerset proposal fails to recognise that many services SCC currently runs need major improvement is misleading and inaccurate. The major service areas such as Children's and Adult services both have major improvement programmes and have deployed sector leading enhancements which are delivering well and providing excellent outcomes for the people of Somerset.
7. The claim that "the County Council is proposing bigger not better government" is inaccurate and misleading. The One Somerset proposal sets out ambitious plans for working with partners, town and parish councils and our communities to put them at the centre of new and innovative approaches to community working and service improvement.
8. The statement that the government is only looking at unitary councils and this is why Stronger Somerset are proposing two unitary councils is simply not true and misleading. The Government has set out very clear criteria that it is using for local government reform that is publicly available and does not preclude a single unitary option.

It is regrettable that such inaccurate and misleading statements have been made but I trust that the above is helpful in setting the record straight.

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight that One Somerset would provide the opportunity to fundamentally enhance local decision-making and move genuine power and responsibility to local communities and their representatives significantly benefitting and enhancing the role of town and parish councils.

Indeed, we are also fortunate to have 278 parish and town councils in Somerset which, as you will appreciate, vary greatly in size in the range of activity they undertake.

Establishing a new unitary authority would, we believe, be a huge opportunity to look at this relationship and to seek to devolve decision making, services and assets in a way that benefits our communities and both the unitary and local parish and town councils.

Indeed, the One Somerset business case details the sorts of services and assets that could be devolved where this is appropriate to local circumstances. It is not exhaustive. This devolution of power and resources to the councils and organisations that are at the real heart of our communities, will provide a focus for local engagement and become the channel for local views, feedback, consultation and communication. Importantly this will have a huge value, not just within the unitary council, but it will also create the opportunity to link up more closely with other local public services, notably the NHS, police, schools and the voluntary sector.

There is dedicated section on the One Somerset website with specific information for town and parish councils that I would urge you to visit [Proposals \(onesomerset.org.uk\)](https://onesomerset.org.uk).

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight that there is a further specific briefing session for town and parish councils at 5pm, 18<sup>th</sup> March, and where we would be happy to answer any questions that you may have. If you would like to join this session, and have not yet already indicated that you are able to do so, please email us at [onesomerset@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:onesomerset@somerset.gov.uk)

Finally, the Government's consultation can be found by visiting the following website. [Somerset Unitarisation - Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#) [Citizen Space - Citizen Space](#). The consultation runs until 19<sup>th</sup> April, and we would urge you to have your say.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Fothergill', with a horizontal line underneath it.

CLr David Fothergill  
Leader, Somerset County Council