

To: All Chief Executives of Somerset Councils

By email



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

21 July 2021

Dear Chief Executive

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOMERSET

On 22 February 2021, Ministers launched a consultation on eight proposals for unitary local government in their areas that councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset had submitted in response to the Secretary of State's invitation of 9 October 2020; two proposals were received from councils in Somerset. The consultation ran for eight weeks to 19 April 2021; the Government received over 13,000 responses in total; for Somerset some 5,500 responses were received as well as a number of campaign leaflet "tear off slips" about the Somerset proposals.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S DECISIONS

I am now writing to let you know that the Secretary of State has today announced his decisions, subject to Parliamentary approval, to implement the proposal for a single unitary council for the whole of the current administrative county of Somerset, and not to implement the proposal for two unitary councils for this area. I attach a copy of the Written Ministerial Statement announcing the decisions to Parliament. A summary of the consultation responses will be placed in the libraries of Parliament and it will be available via gov.uk.

In reaching these decisions, the Secretary of State carefully considered each of the proposals. He assessed each proposal against the three criteria set out in the invitation sent to all the principal councils in Somerset on 9 October. These criteria provide that for a proposal to be implemented, that proposal is likely to improve local government and service delivery across its area; commands a good deal of local support as assessed in the round overall across the whole area of the proposal; and any unitary councils to be established have a credible geography. The Secretary of State has also had regard to all the representations he received, including those received through the consultation, and to all the relevant information available to him, including the results of the local poll that the Somerset district councils held during the period from 18 May to 4 June and the representations received about the poll and its conduct.

The Secretary of State has concluded for the reasons set out below that the proposal for a single unitary council meets all three criteria and that the proposal for two unitary councils meets only the criterion on local support.

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The single unitary proposal

In relation to this proposal, the Secretary of State considered that it could be judged as strongly meeting the criterion of improving local government and service delivery across the area. He noted that the proposal set out how improvements to the operation of local government will be achieved through the removal of the two-tier system and alignment of decision making, where five councils will be replaced by one council. He recognised other public services, other government departments, and the Department's planning directorate supported this view. He also noted that the proposal suggests that direct financial benefits are £52.6m over 5 years and recognises that there will be indirect benefits from service transformation, although not quantifying these as they will be dependent on decisions of the new council. He was aware that the Department's analysts confirmed that in their view the proposal will produce savings, improve value for money and improve the financial sustainability of local government in the area.

The Secretary of State considered that there is a good deal of local support in the round for a single unitary. He recognised that there is a body of support for this proposal amongst residents, albeit as reflected in the local poll less than for the two unitary option, and some support from town and parish councils. He noted that there is evidence of significant support from local businesses and from a regional perspective Bristol Airport, and from public sector service providers including health, police, safeguarding and transport. Three local MPs have indicated their support for the proposal.

The Secretary of State also considered that the single unitary could be judged to meet the credible geography criterion. He noted that the population of the council is within the range of council size set out in the invitation and the geography of the council would preserve service delivery over a county-wide area.

The proposal for two unitary councils

In relation to this proposal, the Secretary of State considered that it could not be judged as meeting the criterion of improving local government and service delivery across the area. He considered in particular that improvements in the operation of local government resulting from the alignment of decision making would be offset by the re-introduction of multiple decision makers and that strategic leadership would be likely to be weakened. He noted that the proposal failed to recognise that the service reforms and joint organisations proposed would be for the new councils to decide. He nevertheless recognised that the proposal suggested that direct financial benefits were £55m over 5 years and indirect benefits (service reform) were £32m over 5 years. He was also aware that the Department's analysts confirmed that in their view the risks of this option would be greater than for the single unitary, although this proposal would produce savings, improve value for money and improve the financial sustainability of local government in the area.

The Secretary of State considered that there is a good deal of local support in the round for the two unitary proposal. He noted that there is a body of support for this proposal from among residents, as reflected in the local poll, and from town and parish councils. He noted the evidence of some support from the voluntary and community

sector, but that the evidence suggested that there is limited support among businesses and very limited support from among public sector service providers. He also noted that one local MP has indicated his support for this proposal.

The Secretary of State also considered that the two unitary proposal could not be judged to meet the credible geography criterion. He noted that the populations of the councils in the proposal are below the range of council size set out in the invitation without identifying any issues of local identity or geography, as referred to in the criterion, to support the geography of the councils. He also recognised that the proposal includes delivering a number of services across the area as a whole which suggests that the geography of the two councils is not adequate for the delivery of all services.

The Secretary of State's conclusions

Accordingly, given his conclusions as to how each of the proposals stands in relation to the criteria, the Secretary of State considered it appropriate to implement the single unitary proposal, and hence he has decided, subject to Parliamentary approval, that this proposal is to be implemented. In reaching this view, he was also aware that all the principal councils in Somerset were seeking change and that the consultation had demonstrated wide support for reform.

NEXT STEPS

The Secretary of State now intends to seek Parliamentary approval for the necessary secondary legislation to implement this single unitary proposal. It is intended that the draft structural changes Order will be laid in Parliament around the turn of the year and that it will include provision for appropriate transitional arrangements, including for elections in May 2022 for the future unitary council and for that council to assume the full range of local authority responsibilities on 1 April 2023, when predecessor councils would be abolished.

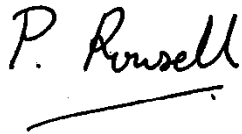
My team and I look forward to working constructively with all the Somerset councils on the implementation of the proposal. As a first step we will be discussing with you and your officers details to be included in the structural changes Order and subsequently we will be sharing with you detailed texts of the Order as the drafting is developed. I would suggest it would be helpful for us to meet with you all in the near future, and my office will be in touch about arranging such a meeting.

Ministers now expect all the councils in Somerset to work collaboratively and constructively together. Ministers are clear that there is now an opportunity, if Parliament approves the structural changes Order, to establish for the people of Somerset more sustainable local government which will better serve local communities and businesses across the area, delivering for them the high quality and efficient local services people and businesses need and deserve.

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I am copying this letter to the Chief Constable, Avon and Somerset Police; Chief Fire Officer, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority; and to the chief executive of the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. Rowsell". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

P Rowsell
Head of Governance Reform and Democracy

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