

Appendix A:

Questions and responses from / to Cllr Linda Vjeh - submitted by email prior to the Special Scrutiny committee meeting 13th April 2021.

In response to the questions raised by you to the Stronger Somerset mail box, I have pleasure in providing a response on behalf of the Stronger Somerset team:

1. What is it about the current consultation that is deemed unacceptable, where it appears that this process has been carried out successfully by other authorities in a similar position?

You will have seen the paper that will be considered by Council later this week, which sets out these concerns. You will be aware that we have made representations to government outlining these concerns with the consultation process and its ability to support the Secretary of State in determining how each of the proposals meets the second criteria around the level of local support. These concerns can be summarised as:

a. There is too limited a number of named consultees to determine the level of support for any proposal

b. The list is dominated by statutory bodies and excludes other key organisations that are important to community life and well-being and have proved to be essential in responding to the pandemic such as:

- Somerset's highly active city, town and parish councils and their representative bodies
- Somerset's voluntary and community organisations

c. There are too many bodies on the list which are either led by or form part of Somerset County Council and this may inadvertently skew the process.

d. Organisations such as Yeovil College and Bridgwater & Taunton College, who are key to improving skills, developing the economy and supporting improvements in outcomes and quality of life in our communities were omitted.

e. Almost as many organisations outside the county are on the consultation list as inside the county, all with an equal say on the future of local services and local communities.

f. Whilst any individual or organisation can respond, narrowing the official list invited to respond risks the perception of a hierarchy where some voices are fundamentally much more important than others and therefore may have deterred residents and organisations of Somerset from responding.

g. Should a resident of Somerset wish to respond, the process and the structure of the consultation makes it particularly hard: the consultation makes no provision for people without easy access to the internet during the lockdown; and for those who are able to be online, the language is exclusionary and the questions asked are unclear.

h. That the available evidence suggests that the overall response rate from people and organisations in Somerset is low and the consultation process will therefore not allow the Secretary of State to make a fully informed decision in cognisance of the true picture as regards criteria 2 and the level of support for each proposal amongst the people who will be affected the most, the residents of Somerset.

2. Why was this call for a referendum/vote left so late in the day, just four days before the end of the consultation process?

We are proposing a referendum now that we have the full knowledge of the Government consultation and the response of Government to the concerns we set out. We believe that the Secretary of State will be well-served by the additional information a referendum will deliver about which of the two proposals for local government reform in Somerset commands local support in the round – one of the key criteria the Government has set out for making the decision.

3. Where is the evidence to support the claim that 'there has been a lack of prominence given to the voice of the most important stakeholders, the actual residents of Somerset'?

We would refer you to the points made in answer to question 1, but particularly points f and g:

Whilst any individual or organisation can respond, narrowing the official list invited to respond risks the perception of a hierarchy where some voices are fundamentally much more important than others and therefore may have deterred residents and organisations of Somerset from responding.

Should a resident of Somerset wish to respond, the process and the structure of the consultation makes it particularly hard: the consultation makes no provision for people without easy access to the internet during the lockdown; and for those who are able to be online, the language is exclusionary and the questions asked are unclear.

4. Should the call for a vote be granted what impact will this have on the opinions already expressed by those who have responded to the consultation process? Having expressed a view, I would be reluctant to have to do so again.

This proposal to hold a local referendum is to help the Secretary of State in understanding and determining the level of support amongst residents for each of the options. The nature of the referendum is different to the consultation in that the consultation invites answers to an online questionnaire, which as we have explained in previous answers use language that is exclusionary and questions that are unclear. The referendum will follow guidance produced by the Electoral Commission and asks a question that presents the options clearly, simply and neutrally, is easy to understand and to the point. It will be unambiguous, will avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another and will avoid misleading voters. The consultation encourages comment and views and will appeal to some people; the referendum, on the other hand, will encourage people to express a preference in a way that is familiar and will be easy to engage with for all voters. In this sense, the consultation and the referendum are different and complementary.

5. It would be useful to have details of the breakdown of costs of the Stronger Somerset proposal and accompanying literature etc. sent to residents so far, given that it is tax-payers money that has been spent, together with a comparison of the overall cost, so far, in relation to the One Somerset bid. From what budget is this funding being drawn?

MHCLG asked all councils to “seek to facilitate the widest possible awareness of, and access to, the consultation” and we have sought to do this taking account of the Local Government Publicity Code and the need to be effective, efficient and appropriate.

All the money spent on the programme has been properly authorised and agreed by the district councils and will be reported through the appropriate council reporting mechanisms.

In order to advise of any specific costs perhaps you could clarify what it is you seek. You will understand that we could not assist with a comparison with the costs spent on the One Somerset bid, as we are not privy to those.

- 6. In comparing the reports from the four districts, there appears to be considerable discrepancy in relation to the estimated costs for the vote, and the allocation of any contingency funding, should it go ahead. I would have thought, that given this call for a vote is a collective call by the four districts that make up the Stronger Somerset bid, that there would be a level of consistency. I would appreciate an explanation.**

Each of the reports make it clear that the total cost of the poll as proposed will be approximately £310,000, although there is likely to be variance dependent on turnout and the number of voters choosing to vote online rather than by post. This cost would be shared with those councils in Somerset that agreed to a poll, taking account of the size of the electorate in each district

Appendix B:

The written response provided by the S151 Officer to the question raised by Scrutiny Committee – Item 8 on the District Agenda (Appointed Leisure Facilities Provider)

The borrowing costs are calculated over a time period equating to the estimated useful life of the asset/s (capital spend) that the borrowing is funding. Therefore the length of the contract and the length of the estimated useful life of the assets are two different things. The Council is funding the capital works on its leisure centres, not Freedom Leisure, so the borrowing and resultant MRP costs have been estimated using our standard financial assumptions.