



Local Referendum on the Future of Local Government in Somerset

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Purpose of the Report

1. The Secretary of State conducted a consultation on the options for the future of local government in Somerset and this closed on 19 April. Two alternative proposals exist. The Government has outlined that a factor in its considerations will be the degree to which a proposal has local support.
2. Concerns have been expressed about the consultation process and the lack of prominence given to the voice of the most important stakeholders, the actual residents of Somerset, within that consultation. There have been calls from Somerset residents for the councils to take steps to ensure residents' views on the proposed changes and their preference for the future of local government can be expressed in a clear and open manner.
3. This report recommends the holding of a local poll (referendum) to give residents a voice in the debate and help the Secretary of State in understanding and determining the level of support amongst residents for each of the options. If a referendum is to be held to inform the Secretary of State's considerations, it will need to take place in advance of the Secretary of State's decision, which is anticipated before Parliament's summer recess.
4. A report was originally scheduled to be discussed at a Special District Executive and the Council meeting on 15 April 2021. In the light of the Secretary of State's letter of 12 April 2021 (Appendix A) it was decided to adjourn the matter to a future meeting and obtain further legal advice. Legal advice has now been received from Bevan Brittan (Appendix B) and James Goudie QC (Appendix C). In the light of that advice, a response has been sent to the Secretary of State (letter attached as Appendix D).
5. Statements from the Monitoring Officer (Appendix E) and Section 151 Officer (Appendix F) have also been included with this report to offer further assurance to Members on lawfulness, fairness, value for money and the administration of the Council's financial affairs and to respond to the matter raised by the Secretary of State.

Public Interest

6. All councils in Somerset are agreed that change is needed in local government if it is to be financially sustainable and deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses. The Secretary of State is currently consulting on the two proposed options for change. Whichever option is chosen, will have a significant impact on the residents and businesses of Somerset, the services they receive and the outcomes delivered for decades to come. A referendum will enable our residents to express their views on the two options for change to help inform the Secretary of State's decision.

Recommendations

7. The District Executive recommend that Full Council agree:
 - a. To hold a local authority poll (local referendum) of all residents of South Somerset on the Electoral Register at 6th May 2021 who are eligible to vote in local elections, on the two options for the future of local government in Somerset;
 - b. To conduct the local authority poll as a postal and online referendum and appoint Civica Electoral Services to conduct the poll;
 - c. The poll be held commencing on Tuesday 18th May 2021 and closing at 5.00PM on Friday 4th June 2021;
 - d. To hold the local authority poll jointly with such other Somerset Councils that agree and to share the costs of the poll with those councils;
 - e. The poll will follow the single non-transferable vote system and the question to be asked will be:

“Which of the two options for change in local government in Somerset to replace the existing five councils do you support (select one only):

 - i. **One council for Somerset** (*“One Somerset” - the plan for a single council proposed by Somerset County Council*)
 - ii. **Two councils for Somerset: Eastern Somerset and Western Somerset** (*“Stronger Somerset” the plan for two councils for Somerset – an Eastern and a Western Somerset council – proposed by the South Somerset District Council and the other district councils of Somerset*)
 - f. To delegate the role of Counting Officer to Civica Electoral Services;
 - g. To make such resources, including staff resources, as necessary to the Counting Officer to enable the referendum to be conducted;
 - h. To delegate to the Chief Executive, the authority to take any further action necessary in relation to this matter;
 - i. To write to the Secretary of State to inform him of the referendum and its dates and ask that the result of the referendum be properly considered as part of the decision making process on the future of local government in Somerset.

Background

8. All councils in Somerset have recognised the need to change in the way local government works in the county if services are to be sustainable and the challenges the county and our communities face are to be met. In addition, the government signalled that it wanted to see change within Somerset local government and invited all councils in Somerset to submit proposals for change in October 2020.
9. In response to that invitation two alternative proposals have been submitted to the Secretary of State for consideration. These proposals are the **Stronger Somerset** proposal for two new unitary councils – Eastern Somerset and Western Somerset - replacing the existing five councils together with reform, put forward by the four Somerset District Councils and the **One Somerset** proposal for one new unitary council for Somerset, replacing the five existing councils, put forward by Somerset County Council.
10. The government has made it clear that local support will be one of the key criteria in any decision on the future of local government in Somerset. The Secretary of State launched a consultation on 22 February 2021 which closed on 19 April 2021.

The Consultation

11. In the 9 October 2020 invitation letter to councils to submit proposals for change to local government in Somerset, the Secretary of State for Housing & Communities outlined that there were three key criteria that would be used in reaching his decision around the options for change. The second of these criteria is that the reforms must 'command a good deal of local support in the round'.
12. In launching the consultation, the Government wrote to a number of stakeholder organisations. It also set out that anyone, inside and outside of Somerset, including residents, was able to respond to the consultation but that no approach would be made or publicity undertaken in this regard.
13. Somerset's district councils have made representations to the government outlining their 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:



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- a. Somerset's highly active city, town and parish councils and their representative bodies
 - b. 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.
14. At the District Council's Network meeting on 10 March 2021, the Secretary of State underlined the importance of residents' views in the reorganisation and reform process, stating that it must be right for residents to have equal footing in terms of responding to the consultation and that although there is a legal list of stakeholders that must be engaged, residents' views and what is popular and supported by the communities are vital. Unfortunately, neither the representations made to government nor the Secretary of State's support for residents' views have resulted in any changes to the consultation process.
15. There has been a call from some groups and sections of the community to let all residents have their say on the future of local government in Somerset through the holding of a referendum. These calls have increased in recent weeks, possibly due to the concerns around the consultation process.
16. In the light of the above, this report recommends the holding of a Local Authority Poll or what is commonly known as a Local Referendum as a means of supporting the Secretary of State in making his decision, particularly in respect of criteria 2 of the decision making process in determining the level of local support.

The Holding of a Local Authority Poll (Local Referendum)

The Power to Hold a Local Authority Poll



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17. Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003 provides a specific power for local authorities to hold a local advisory poll (referendum). The Act does not provide for local electors to be able to demand a referendum.
18. The result of a section 116 poll is not binding on the council or any other entity. It is purely advisory. It does however provide clear evidence of the public views on the matter being put before the voters. If the Council decides to hold a section 116 poll to ascertain the views of its residents on the future of local government in Somerset, that poll would be a purely advisory indication of residents' views to assist the Secretary of State in making a decision by providing evidence in respect of local support (the second of the government's assessment criteria).
19. Under section 116 it is up to the Council to determine who to poll and how the referendum is to be conducted. Accordingly, the Council needs to decide: -
 - a. does it wish to hold such a local advisory referendum?And if it does:
 - b. the franchise (who will have a vote)
 - c. the question; and
 - d. how the poll is to be conducted.
20. In addition to the power contained in Section 116, the General Power of Competence set out in Chapter 1 of the Localism Act 2011, in giving councils the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation, is an alternative route that the Council could use to decide to hold a local poll/referendum, particularly as holding a poll/referendum is not prohibited by other legislation.

Franchise

21. It is proposed that those to be included in the section 116 poll will be all those on the South Somerset Electoral Register on 6 May 2021 who are entitled to vote in local elections.

The Voting system and Question to be asked

22. The Electoral Commission has produced guidance for central Government for assessing referendum questions, and this provides a useful guide for determining the question to be used on the ballot paper for a section 116 poll. These guidelines state that a referendum question should present the options clearly, simply and neutrally, be easy to understand and to the point. It should be unambiguous, it should avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another and it should avoid misleading voters. This point was also echoed by James Goudie QC. The question should be written in plain language (language that uses short sentences, is simple, direct and concise and uses familiar words while avoiding jargon or technical terms that would not be easily understood by most people).

23. The question should be written in neutral language, avoiding words that suggest a judgement or opinion either explicitly or implicitly. The information contained in the question should be factual, describe the question, the options clearly and accurately and the question should avoid assuming anything about voters' views.
24. In considering the question, the voting system needs to be taken in to account. Most polls in England utilise the single non-transferrable vote system, also known as first past the post. It is the system that voters are most familiar with when taking part in elections and polls. Therefore, it is proposed to utilise this system in the local authority poll.
25. Following independent advice from one of the country's leading elections and electoral law specialists it is proposed that the following question is put in the poll to the residents of Somerset:

"Which of the two options for change in local government in Somerset to replace the existing five councils do you support (select one only):

- a. **One council for Somerset** (*"One Somerset" - the plan for a single council proposed by Somerset County Council*)
- b. **Two councils for Somerset: Eastern Somerset and Western Somerset** (*"Stronger Somerset" the plan for two councils for Somerset – an Eastern and a Western Somerset council – proposed by the South Somerset District Council and the other district councils of Somerset*)

Conduct of the Referendum.

26. There are three options that have been considered for running the referendum (all costs being the total cost across the four districts of Somerset):

- i. **Postal poll using a supplier but with the district councils administering the count**

Estimated cost - £178,000 + return postage (approx. £55,000 to £110,000) plus staff time for administration and counting

- ii. **Postal poll and internet poll using a supplier with the supplier also administering the counting process and verifying the result**

Estimated cost - £310,000

- iii. **Traditional poll**

This would be a mixture of polling stations and postal votes, administered by the district council election teams.

Estimated Cost – up to £933,000

27. As well as cost, there are a number of other important considerations in the conducting of the poll.
28. Due to the Covid 19 restrictions the 6th May 2021 is the first day an election or referendum can be legally held.
29. On 6th May, elections for the Police and Crime Commissioners are due to be held. These elections are being conducted in accordance with the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections Order 2012 which facilitates combined elections, but only those types of elections prescribed within the regulations. The list of elections capable of being combined with the PCC elections does not include a referendum to be conducted under Section 116 Local Government Act 2003 and therefore it is not possible to combine the poll with the existing elections.
30. Whilst the poll could be held as an in person poll on another day, councils would not have the power to force public venues such as schools, to provide rooms or other facilities for voters. In addition, this would require considerable resources and significant additional cost at a time when council resources are already stretched.
31. It will be important locally that the result of the poll is able to be regarded as a true reflection of locally expressed opinion. If the poll or part of it was administered by the district council electoral teams, they would undoubtedly uphold the highest standards and provide total impartiality in the process, and other safeguards such as independent observers would be in place. However, contracting out the entire poll to a third party with an excellent reputation for conducting impartial polls would give added assurance that the result is a true reflection of those who expressed a view in the poll. This also reduces the risk of bias referred to by the Secretary of State.
32. Accordingly, it is recommended that the poll be conducted as a postal and on line ballot entirely conducted by a third party, Civica Electoral Services (formerly the Electoral Reform Services). It is further recommended that the poll be held commencing Tuesday 18th May 2021 to avoid any confusion with the Police and Crime Commissioner Election, and close at 5.00 PM on Friday 4th June 2021, giving residents two clear weeks to return their ballot papers or vote on line.

Financial Implications

The total cost of the poll will be approximately £310,000 although there is likely to be variance dependent on turnout and the number of voters choosing to vote on line rather than by post. This cost is for a poll covering the electors in all four districts of Somerset and would be shared with those councils in Somerset that agreed to a poll. Therefore the cost to South Somerset District Council will be approximately £90,400 and will be met from the Local Government Change Reserve.

A statement from the Council's S151 Officer can be found at Appendix F



Legal implications (if any) and details of Statutory Powers

The Local Government Act 2003 Section 116 provides a specific power for local authorities to hold a local advisory poll (referendum). The Localism Act 2011 Section 1 also gives Councils the General Power of Competence to hold a local poll/referendum.

Section 61 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, relates to the power to postpone certain other elections and referendums in the period from 16 March 2020 to 5 May 2021, and this applies to a poll under Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003. This means that the earliest date a local poll could commence is 7 May 2021.

External Legal advice has also confirmed that the Council is legally able to use the Electoral roll for the purpose of holding a local poll/referendum.

A statement from the Council's Monitoring Officer can be found at Appendix E

Council Plan Implications

The holding of a local authority poll on such a significant potential change for customers, residents and communities supports core values set out in the Council Plan, in particular:

“Open and transparent - Actively communicating, engaging and listening to feedback”

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

None directly arising from the report.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The holding of a postal and online poll with ballot papers sent directly to each elector will improve access for all residents to consultation on the future of local government in Somerset than is currently the case.