

Parish and Town Councils
Via email

Please ask for: David Fothergill

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Date: 8 January 2020

Dear Clerk

Please share this letter with your Council members.

Future of Local Government in Somerset – Next steps

For the last two years or so, the Leaders and Chief Executives of all of Somerset's five local authorities have been meeting regularly to discuss the future shape of local government in the county.

Our population continues to grow and age, funding for local government continues to lag behind demand and the county (and region) has relatively low productivity and wages, as well as poor social mobility.

We all agree that staying the same is not an option.

Following in-depth research an independent report setting out the pros, cons and possibilities of various options has been with us since February last year. This has finally been published. The options range from the various councils working closer together, to the creation of a single 'Unitary' Authority. All the options have merit, and each has the potential to save millions. This link www.onesomerset.org.uk will take you to our dedicated web pages where a copy of the report can be viewed from lunchtime today (Wednesday, 8 Jan).

Personally, I am very sceptical that the five Councils *can* successfully work closer together to the degree required – this was tried before and didn't happen. There has been ample opportunity for this over the past 18 months but little action. As I have said many times before, I believe the 'Unitary' Authority option is the most cost effective and best way forward for Somerset.

It would mean disbanding the County Council and the four District councils and creating one new Council to deliver all services. In doing so, it would reduce duplication and end the complications, confusion and inefficiencies that inevitably come with two layers of local government. City, Town and Parish councils and councillors would remain outside the reorganisation but I believe this would be an opportunity for them to develop new roles with access to funding streams.

It would be simpler for our residents and partner agencies and offer so much potential investment into frontline services.

Extra money could mean investment in schools, roads, housing services, public transport, climate change initiatives; there's so much we could do with funding on this scale. I am convinced it's the right thing to do.

The report estimates potential savings of £47m a year. Even if we were only to save half of that it would make a massive difference. This cannot be ignored, and I strongly believe that I would be failing in my elected mandate if I did not seek to deliver long-term sustainable services for the people of Somerset.

Now that the report is in the public domain, I intend to make the case for a single Authority and seek ways of progressing that option. That work will start immediately, and I hope that you will participate as this develops.

Nothing has been decided yet and this is the start of what will be a long process. Firstly, to get to a point of an initial decision being made – this will require Government support. There will then be considerable work to turn this into reality and to implement it.

There is likely to be a difference of opinion with some of my colleagues in other councils on this issue and inevitably that will put a strain on some of the working relationships. However, I remain committed to working closely with all Somerset authorities and agencies in the best interests of the people of our residents. There will be challenges along the way, but this is an important chance to make a major, positive change in the way local government is organised.

This is an opportunity for Somerset to share in the benefits of a single tier of local Government that can already be seen in Wiltshire, Dorset, Cornwall, B&NES, North Somerset and more than 130 other authorities. It is an opportunity to invest more into the services we all value and I am increasingly convinced that this is the right thing to do.

I remain committed to working closely with you on all matters of importance to the people of Somerset. I hope that you will be willing to participate in this venture and I promise to keep you informed of the progress of this work as we move forward.

Yours sincerely

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

Cllr David Fothergill
Leader of the Council