Response from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

“Para 13: The public consultation was biased in many ways as noted earlier in HL Paper, but it is not mentioned that the proponents of the merger had promoted it in the local press as a fait accompli, (emphasising that the councils had already taken a vote and the proposal to merge had already been sent to the Minister) BEFORE this consultation took place. It was also repeatedly claimed, inaccurately, that the merger per se would save £3.1m.”

On the first point raised regarding the merger being presented as a fait accompli before the consultation was carried out, it would have been illogical for the councils concerned to spend funds on a public consultation without first securing the support of the councillors. How this decision was presented in the press locally is not an issue for MHCLG. The public consultation included a demographically representative phone poll and staffed events at which any member of the public could have their say.

“Was the petition emailed/posted to MHCLG on 19 January 2018 by the Chair of Taunton Deane Liberal Democrats which had 741 signatories asking to “Stop the Merger” considered by the Minister?”

I can confirm that the petition submitted by Michael Owen (chair of the Taunton Deane Liberal Democrats group), and signed on his behalf by Susan Levinge, was considered by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State recognised that the petition did not contain signatures, merely names against the majority of which were postcodes. He also recognised that the petition contained no reasons for objecting to the merger. He accordingly treated it as a single representation - one of the 123 representations opposed to the merger.

“Para 14: The Business Plan entitled High Level Business Case – Transformation, which was adopted by the Councils at the same time as the votes on the merger were taken, was attached to all three options under discussion, viz: Continue with joint working, A full merger between the two councils or Go it alone. The Business Case claims that savings of appx £2.2m would be made by Taunton Deane Council and £0.4m by West Somerset should joint working continue (para 1.17.1 Option 1)) and that the savings predicted by merging are minimal only £0.5m (Para 1.17.1 Option 2). The misleading figure of £3.1m attributable to the merger itself has been quoted repeatedly in the public domain, most noticeably by the Leader of Taunton Deane Council.

Para 18: It is here stated again that becoming one council will secure £3.1m including £0.5m from the current shared working. That is not quite the case. The £0.5m is the amount that relates to the merger, the £2.6m is the amount that would be achieved by implementing the High Level Business Case whether continuing joint working or merging. I believe the current shared working between the two councils already saves almost £2m per annum.”

The £3.1 million of savings is comprised of the ongoing savings (£2.6 million) made by continued joint working and the additional efficiency savings (£0.5 million) generated by the merger as recognised in the Explanatory Memorandum. It has been made clear by both
councils that should the merger not go ahead West Somerset would become financially unsustainable. At this point Taunton Deane would be obliged to remove itself from the current shared services arrangement. This would result in the loss of all savings for both councils. Thus the savings attributed to the merger are £3.1 million – the merger both securing ongoing savings and yielding additional savings.

“The claim that the fears that Taunton Deane would be detrimentally affected by the merger were a “misconception” does not seem to have any validity. There is no evidence that the opinion of the electorate has changed since expressing their concern at the time of consultation. News of the West Somerset financial predicament does not improve, and if West Somerset cannot afford to continue in joint working, then Taunton Deane must be going to subsidise the costs of providing their services should the merger go ahead.”

The Leaders of both councils have made representation to say that, though Taunton Deane is in a more financially stable position than West Somerset, it too will stand to benefit from the merger as a result of increased savings, greater efficiency in contracting and economies of scale. This will in turn ensure that Taunton Deane remains financially sustainable going forward. Taunton Deane is therefore not entering this merger in the context solely of subsidising West Somerset.

“The phrase “jam tomorrow” is indeed apposite. The High Level Business Case is already running many hundreds of thousands of pounds over budget and many months behind schedule. The MP for West Somerset (copied into this email) has long expressed doubts about the efficacy of this Plan, which are shared by many in both constituencies. The manner in which it was pushed through both Council chambers without a separate vote seems extraordinary.”

It is understood that whilst there have been some delays in implementing the merger, the councils have made clear that the merger for April 2019 is on track (subject to Parliament approving the instruments), that the expected benefits are deliverable, and that Leaders of both councils have recently confirmed their strong support for the merger.

“Many people are still extremely worried about the future of a merged council, particularly in view of the failure of business case to live up to expectation. Announced only last week there is now the possibility of a full reorganisation of Somerset into a unitary authority. The consequence of such a move will nullify the assumptions of the business case underlying the proposed merger. Should the merger proceed the administrative costs ranging from redundancies to investment in capital development for the proposed new district council will be wasted public money as the configuration of staffing requirements, accommodation and the mundane requirements such as signage and printing letter heads will call for a completely different solution to the proposed merger. The public will be perplexed by 2 reorganisations, possibly within as many years, and profoundly irritated at the waste of public money when there is a predictable and openly discussed alternative to the current merger proposal.”

With regard to any potential proposal for unitarisation in Somerset, it should be noted that no proposal has been received by MHCLG and hence no assessment has been made of its viability. If and when a proposal is received from the area it will be considered by the Secretary of State against the same criteria as have been announced for assessment of all
unitarisation proposals. Therefore, though there is potential for two reorganisations to take place, it is not certain, and it is considered that not only does the proposed merger have merits within itself, but also that it would not be an obstacle to unitarisation should a viable proposal be received. Indeed the criteria for considering mergers announced by the Secretary of State on 7th November 2017 set out that the proposal should not pose an obstacle to locally-led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

14 May 2018