Representations from Ms S Levinge

I have followed the process of the proposed merger closely, and when I read this report (and Appendix 2 to the paper), I am concerned that some important issues seem to have been overlooked or maybe not accurately presented.

- 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. 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?

- 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.

- Para 20
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.
Para 21.
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.

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.

9 May 2018