

IAN LIDDELL-GRAINGER, M.P.



HOUSE OF COMMONS LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick, MP,

May 30th 2021

Dear Robert,

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 24th May to the Leaders of the four Somerset District Councils about the typographical error of the website address for ‘One Somerset’ in some of the paperwork for their local government reorganization referendum.

I have to say that I read the tone of the comments in your letter to the Leaders with some incredulity and wondered whether you had taken the trouble to look at the website for yourself or relied on your civil servants and the whining of the County Council. The one tiny typographical error in some of the papers displayed a link to a spoof website rather than County’s ‘One Somerset’ campaign. It was not deliberate. Everyone regrets it happened but nobody from either side spotted the error in time.

I would point out that the County Council was sent the paperwork – their Chief Executive is on record as saying he read it himself - but still the error evaded detection. Could the County Council’s failure to spot the mistake have been genuine? Perhaps they simply did not invest a close enough look? Or was the slip noted but deliberately withheld from the District Councils in order that it might be used later to derail the entire referendum? Some people are suggesting this could have happened. The question locally is if the action or inaction of the County Council displayed incompetence, malice, duplicity, or their contempt for democracy.

The complete over-reaction by the County Council, my colleagues and, indeed, you, have resulted in the spoof website going viral and what can only be described as referendum rage by my constituents and residents across Somerset. They can see the website for the satire and spoof it is and are furious that the County Council appears to do and say anything to get this vote cancelled. Respect for the County Council is fast becoming contempt.

Yes, there was a consultation on the matter by your department, but it was viewed by most of my constituents as a pathetic online survey. People have no faith in the way it was organised or how you consulted. They doubt if it was impartial and are of the view that you are colluding with the County Council, your decision is predetermined in favour of the county. I gave you my thoughts on the way the consultation was organized when I wrote to you on 9th March.

Democracy matters to my constituents and the people of Somerset across all parties, and they feel that their voices are being stifled by the Government and Conservative Group on the County Council. When we claim to be the party of democracy we cannot behave in this way and for you and my colleagues to claim that the referendum is a waste of money and castigate the districts is a disgrace.

For one of my colleagues to infer in a letter that she wrote to Somerset West and Taunton Council in her own words – or words put into her mouth by others – that not only was the referendum a waste of money, but that her constituents were incapable of working out what is best for them is a sentiment that leaves me cold. If other parties use this against her at a future General Election she will only have herself to blame.

On the question of wasting money, the County Council constantly evades questions about how they spent the additional £82 million received from Government during the Covid crisis. This evasion increases the view that such funds were used to prop up the books rather than properly spent. Not a day goes by when I do not receive emails complaining about the County Council - whether it be about issues of adult social care, where they have been told by county there is no money available; or failure of special needs education funding; or total financial incompetence in highways matters.

The county council uses one stock answer – they always blame lack of funding from the Government – never their own ineptitude. However, to the disgust of my constituents, county has found money to employ a full-time senior officer and team who continued to work during the pandemic on their unitary aspirations. The county spent £700,000 developing the case for One Somerset. They also hired a huge public relations team. Real costs greatly exceed £1million.

By contrast I receive nothing but praise for my District Councils and the way they have handled Covid, distributed government grants and so on. Four District Councils have arranged a full referendum for around £300,000 – it is a substantial sum, of course, but it is far less than the profligacy of their opponents in County Hall.

The price of this referendum is the same as a Mars bar for every voter!

The hysteria being created about irreverent and irrelevant websites by county, my colleagues and, indeed yourself, is simply making you all look foolish. People believe you are colluding with County and desperate to stop a democratic poll by any means possible. They think you are frightened that the wrong result may emerge.

But a referendum is the only fair way to find out what system of local government Somerset people prefer, and we need to show them as a Party and a Government that we have faith in their intelligence and the democratic process in the same way we do at election time.

On a related point, I wonder if you saw the cartoon Times about Dominic Cummings, the Prime Minister and the classic comedy film Airplane. What a coincidence. Perhaps someone should be raising hysteria about this “offensive” political satire as well. Will you demand that the cartoonist apologise? Will you be complaining to The Times?

As always, I am happy to discuss this matter further with you if you so wish.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Liddell-Grainger', with a period at the end.

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