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My Ref: DD/scb
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Via email

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and
Local Government
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Dear Secretary of State

The publication of new studies into the R rate at regional level by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of Cambridge brings into sharp focus the challenge for local authorities in dealing effectively with new information on the spread of COVID-19 virus.

We are vigilantly watching our local indicators around case numbers and rates, case spread and deaths from the virus. Only this week we received a report from Public Health England which was a detailed investigation in our case mix in North Somerset. Through that additional study we are able to give public reassurance that our surge in cases relates to a significant outbreak at our local hospital rather than a higher than usual spread in the community.

However, one of the key indicators of cause for concern in the public's mind is the R rate and whether this has gone above 1. The publication of regional rates adds little value at each individual local authority level given the wide range of communities here in the South West from Gloucestershire to the Isles of Scilly. Yet our local residents and key stakeholders, like schools, are sensitive to the publication of these numbers and expect each local authority to have a clear description of what actions should follow and what resources and powers are available to 'lockdown' part or all of a local authority area including potentially public spaces, businesses and schools.

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It would be helpful if national Government could make it clearer what local authorities should be doing to interpret regional R rates and the actions that should follow. For example, will the national government briefing reflect on these new figures and set out their expectations to help guide a local response? At the moment we have regional indicators that fall between the two important layers of government – local and national – and there is no way to ensure consistency in interpretation at local government level unless a national policy and guidance is in place.

We will be developing our Outbreak Control Plan in June and it would be very helpful to have a clear direction from you on how the ongoing R rate publication – at regional and national level – will guide the identification of and response to a localised outbreak or overall increased risk of infection.

I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Donald Davies
Leader
North Somerset Council



Cllr Mike Bell
Deputy Leader
North Somerset Council

Cc: John Penrose MP
Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP