

ACRA

Alliance of Christchurch Residents Associations

1st June 2016

To all Christchurch Councillors

Dear Councillor

Non-Financial Aspects of Local Government Reorganisation

Scope

1. We understand that you have a special Council Meeting scheduled for 14th June.
2. To assist you with your deliberations, we asked our member organisations to consider the services provided by Dorset County Council (DCC) and Christchurch Borough Council (CBC) and to identify those they felt should remain as or become local in their delivery following the planned reorganisation of Local Government.
3. This is meant to be a “*non-financial*” review to the extent that such a thing is possible (a separate financial review will be produced once the high level financial analysis becomes available and it is there rather than here that we will address matters such as the debt levels and pension fund deficiencies of Councils in Dorset).
4. However, there are some financial aspects that can’t be lightly ignored when considering service delivery. It is a fact that it is cheaper to deliver a service in urban areas than in rural ones. In urban areas people live in close proximity to one another and to service delivery points. The infrastructure is well developed. In rural areas, the opposite situation often prevails. *Thus any scheme to tie Christchurch in with the rural areas of Dorset as against the urban areas of Bournemouth and Poole must be able to demonstrate that it has mitigating features that offset Christchurch residents subsidising the residents of rural Dorset.*

Shared Services

5. In theory the delivery of many services is independent of type of governance. It doesn’t matter to a social worker dealing with an abused child whether or not the council is unitary or not. However, we can’t ignore the fact that in the future strategic transport and economic development will be provided by the Dorset Combined Authority whilst many services will probably be provided by shared services, much as refuse collection is currently managed by the Dorset Waste Partnership. Indeed we have identified in addition to waste and the payment of benefits a number of other potential shared services:

Tourism

Coastal Protection and Maintenance

Countryside and Parks

The management of Social Services (note, the fact that Social Services is currently a DCC function does not mean that it can be ignored. Events in Christchurch contribute to the cost currently borne by DCC and actions by DCC impact upon events and thus costs in Christchurch. This whole very expensive and contentious area in future will have to be addressed to some degree locally here in Christchurch. There will be a strong case we believe for local use of Social Services such as care for the elderly to be paid for locally thus ending the current system of cross-subsidy between Councils)

The management of Planning (whilst decision making should be made as close to the area affected as is possible, the processing of planning applications for example could be a shared service)

Highway Maintenance

All aspects of IT

Legal Services

Human Resources management

Treasury, Finance and Accounting

Potential Local Services

6. We now consider the potential for the local delivery of services in: education; local highways; housing; planning policy and decisions; and social services. We have not considered the police and fire services or the NHS believing them to be outside the remit of this paper.
7. Education is in a mess with Government policy being unclear and the system split between two camps – independence or local authority controlled. The effect so far has been to spread the cost of DCC operations over a dwindling number of schools thereby raising the cost per school. We suggest that the provision of education should be included in any negotiations with a leaning towards obtaining some level of local control.
8. The maintenance of the roads is a capital intensive business that does not readily lend itself to small local operations. The amount of money available to fund these operations has been cut drastically over the last ten years making economies of scale a vital factor. What we can see scope for is a local budget to be spent on road markings, signage, etc.
9. Housing policy is something that lends itself to local control. It is the type of decision that should be taken as close to the area in question as is possible.
10. Planning is a hierarchical activity. The new Combined Authority has responsibility for strategic planning. The next tier of governance will need to take responsibility for some aspects of area planning. That will leave scope for a degree of local planning. The break lines between tiers are a matter for negotiation but clearly in any structure there is scope for Christchurch to have some degree of control over local planning matters.

11. Social Services are a very difficult and contentious area. A basic maxim of public finance is '*no taxation without representation*'. In other words there should always be a direct link between the representatives we elect, the Council Tax we pay, and how that tax is spent.
12. The Government's objective is self-sufficiency for local services funded from the Council Tax, both domestic and business, which means that local taxation will bear the whole burden of massively expensive public services such as child care and care for the elderly, *the changing standards of which are determined by central government*.
13. Such a huge disconnect between tax payer and effective tax spender with local Councillors playing piggy-in-the-middle will not in our view be a healthy development, particularly when it is based on Council Tax, *which is a highly regressive form of taxation (and we will return to that issue when considering the financial aspects)*. We see little scope for local control of Social Services.

Sense of Place

14. We turn now to the more intangible aspect known as "*sense of place*".
15. Whilst difficult to define most small towns have a sense of place that its inhabitants value. This is true of central Wimborne just as much as Christchurch. It is missing in places like Boscombe but can be found to some extent in areas like Holdenhurst Village and Muscliff.
16. This sense of place is we believe created by three main factors. The first is the physical characterisation of the locality through flower beds on roundabouts, river walks, children's playgrounds, clean litter free public areas, and so on. Clearly we must strive to ensure that the provision and maintenance of such amenities remain a local responsibility.
17. The second is the willingness of the local population to form local organisations such as Christchurch Angels, Christchurch Local History Society and indeed our Residents Associations. We believe such willingness to be independent of the structure of Local Government.
18. The third is continuity of environment over time. Christchurch has been around for a long time and has a strong heritage that is evidenced in the Priory and other historic buildings and such institutions as our museums. Into this category fits the local Mayor of Christchurch. Taken in isolation there is a wide range of opinion as to the worth of our Mayor that encompasses "*a waste of money*" at one extreme to "*a vital part of our community*" on the other. We can see an argument that says this question should not be seen in isolation but rather as a part of what creates a sense of place. If there is validity in that argument then it is one in favour of retaining the local Mayor.

And Finally

19. The intention of this paper is to inform those negotiating on behalf of Christchurch of the views of local residents as to what *non-financial* matters Christchurch should strive to achieve control over in the forthcoming reorganisation. One could of course simply say "*as much as possible*" but that would be so unrealistic as to be positively unhelpful.
20. There are two ways of looking at this process. One is to see the supposed horror of potentially being swallowed by Bournemouth and indulge in much hand wringing and gnashing of teeth. Or

one can see a wholly new structure being formed from a mixture of existing Councils and thus *an opportunity to negotiate a new standing and to do some things in a new and different way.*

21. In Dorset Christchurch (almost uniquely) is financially sound and thus has a strong and interesting negotiating hand *that it should exploit to the full.* We urge boldness and vision on our negotiators.

Yours sincerely

Jim Biggin,
Secretary
7 Hurn Road, Christchurch, BH23 2RJ
jebgreycells@zoho.com,
01202-473-658